

The Reclamation has already begun (old one)

by Fade Maybe

Category: Halo, Mass Effect

Genre: Adventure, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2013-03-14 02:04:54

Updated: 2015-01-04 10:23:45

Packaged: 2016-04-27 04:07:38

Rating: T

Chapters: 18

Words: 145,020

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: This story has been moved to Reclamation has already begun V2. Please follow and favorite that one. Not this one! There's too many flaws with the plot. So...yeah. Follow that one. Don't click this one...

1. First unto the Breach

"_For us, the storm has passed. The war is over. But let us never forget those who journeyed into the howling dark and did not return. For their decision required courage beyond measure...sacrifice, and unshakable conviction that their fight; our fight, was elsewhere. As we start to rebuild, this hillside will remain barren, a memorial to heroes fallen. They ennobled all of us, and they shall not be forgotten._"

- Fleet Admiral Lord Terrance Hood, Supreme Commander of Humanity and all United Nations Space Command Defense Forces during the end of the Great War and the Period of Rebuilding

"_Never before have so many come together from all quarters of the galaxy, but never before have we faced an enemy such as this. The Reapers will show us no mercy so we must give them no quarter. They will terrorize our populations. We must stand fast in the face of that terror. They will advance until our last city falls, but we will not fall. We will prevail. Each of us will be defined by our actions in the coming battle. Stand fast. Stand strong. Stand together. Hackett out._"

- Fleet Admiral Steven Hackett, Supreme Commander of all Systems Alliance and Citadel Military Forces during the end of the Reaper War

****Aboard UNSC** _**Legend After**_**

****18 light years outside UNSC space****

****July 28th, 2557 Military Calendar, 08:36****

A day passed ever since the Elites found another. A great fear that remained classified to the people of Earth. A fear of an ancient race that almost brought complete destruction to every being in the Milky Way galaxy. Of course, it was only a matter of time before somebody in this galaxy found another Ring.

An Elite recon corvette made the discovery, scouting what they believed was some sort of beacon. Identity and signature unknown. Despite their massive "contribution", this wasn't the only major discovery out here.

After a day of initial discovery, a massive gravitational depression within the space-time curvature was detected only about ten-thousand kilometers out. It surrounded an unnatural object, containing a large one-way direct energy output. The object was small, so anything like this must've been a black hole.

But no. They discovered something else, something oddly frightening. Even in the presence of the Rings.

The artifact was codenamed God's Key. It was encoded in ice, a single ellipse shaped end that encompassed two rings which entangled each other, forming the center of an oval. At the main curvature of the oval, opposite end to the group of ships, outstretched two arms that surrounded an area of empty space, cutting the full connection of the oval. Main antennas strut out from near the connected side of the oval, giving off no visible wavelength. It was pure white, standing perfectly still even with the distant gravitational influences of the Ring and its local sun. Holes carved in the sides of the metal, with blackness only within them.

Hours later when the UNSC was informed, the eggheads jumped up and down with the excitement of a toddler. "What new mysteries could the dead Forerunners hold?", "Was this a weapon the UN can utilize?", "A tool of peace?" (my ass), "A smart A.I that's able to give the secrets of Requiem?"

Even with the venture of the UNSC, primarily the Office of Naval Intelligence, in Forerunner technology, caution was installed at every moment. Counter measures at every point, guard units, fail safes, so on. Even if the head authority of security felt that something was wrong, orders were to eliminate the artifact with extreme prejudice.

What gave the UNSC such authority to take such extreme measures? Well after the discovery of Installation 04, it immediately led to its necessary destruction along with the UNSC Pillar of Autumn, and the death of Captain Jacob Keyes. One of the best naval commanders in UNSC history. Later, Installation 05, leading to a battle that almost completely destroyed Humanity along with all other life in the galaxy. Then Installation 00, where like 04, it was destroyed when Sierra-117 sacrificed himself in order to stop the Flood menace to save Humanity. (Though there were some rumors and leaks here and there that he was alive and back on the Infinity. HIGHCOM didn't do anything to tame those rumors, so that could mean a lot of things.) The Installation 03 research station incident. ONI at first sanitized the incident pretty well, but from what the left open, everybody on the station turned into ash. Literally. Then finally,

the recent battle over Earth against an ancient Forerunner being.

ONI was only able to hide it from the public. It's been classified under the Cole Protocol, to secrecy. So the majority of military personnel of a commanding echelon or above knew at least parts of the story.

So after all these nice little events, wellâ€¦the UNSC didn't want another incident or battle raging over an ancient Forerunner Installation.

But besides the track record, the scientists argued that nothing can be really studied until they got near the artifact. You can only get so much information from a far distance. And believe or not, with backing from ONI they were able to persuade the UNSC to give them the pseudo-green light

This is why Captain Mark Florence was here.

He looked towards the station, surrounded by the black void and thousands of distant stars. Mark sighed, looking to the young and green faces of the crew. The ship was newly built, one of the thousands that the UNSC was pumping out year after year. The same can apply to the crew. Most of them were somewhere between sixteen and twenty, still awkward as they bumped into each other every once and a while. Every time the spoke you could physically feel the lack of confidence within them. Even with the boast of military training, it can only do so much.

But he couldn't say much. As a captain he was only twenty-seven, considered very young in the UNSC. But in the final days of the war, when Humanity could only see darkness, age, experience, and sometimes in extreme cases, ability, was no longer a factor. In correlations to the United States during the Second World War, the UN held emergency promotions and placements to replace the dying out personnel.

He looked old, hopefully. Dark circles that quickly developed during the Great War along with a natural rough complexion, outlined by brown skin of a Neapolitan and Spaniard inheritance.

The ship's engines hummed ever so slightly, eventually disappearing when the mind learns to silence it out after three months of tour, guarding the UNSC borders incase for the Elites decide to say "fuck it", and attack them. The blue and green lights of the holo-table and other control panels flickered and illuminated upon every one's skin as sailors quietly moved from one station to another. A peaceful calmness always present in the quiet depths of space.

UNSC _Shadow Man_ passed over head. The ship windows darkening in reaction to the bright blue lights of their engines. There were three ships in the group. UNSC _Legend After_ was the only nearby fully armed, conventional warship, pulled off prematurely from what would be their destined nine-month patrol. The beloved and always truthful Office of Naval Intelligence, primarily her holiest highness Admiral Serin Osman herself called upon the services of the patrol group to ensure the Elites do not hinder advantages from Humanity. Of course, ONI could've waited to reinforce the security team. But from what Mark could infer, they might've been rushing to ensure our Elite allies didn't gain anything that could be used against Humanity. The

Fleet of Retribution along with the _Shadow of Intent_ held off six-thousand klicks near the ring.

As loyalty to the Navy more than anything, Captain Florence immediately informed HIGHCOM, along with Lord Hood. But that was about twenty minutes ago. And there hasn't been a response.

The other two ships were UNSC research vessel (a modified civilian freighter), _Shadow Man_, and UNSC Black Cat Prowler, _To the Right_. The research vessel was probably pulled off from the constant scans and research on the new planets within Elite territory. The Prowler obviously pulled from the constant spying and sabotage ONI and the UNSC play on the Elites.

The more the merrier.

"Captain, ships are dangerously near the deck. _Shadow Man_ is requesting to get port side of God's Key, converse about ten klicks out, front pointing north in our frame of direction." Reported the navigator, Alice Morganson, sitting back comfortably at her station, gliding her fingers through the holograms.

"Tell _Shadow Man_ to stand by. I want the _Legend After_ to move into a higher elevation in our frame of direction to provide better support if necessary. Inform Lord Hood of all movement." Captain Florence ordered, voice tainted by a slight Italian accent.

"So we're moving without Lord Hood's conformation?" Morganson said, a doubtful face as his orders.

"Not everything has to be reported to Lord Hood, Ensign. We aren't breaking the hard deck."

For whatever reason, another part of Mark asked if this wasn't endangering the mission, thus endangering Humanity. Movements should be reported, just in case. But as the ship prepped to move forth, whatever it was soon silenced.

"Aye, aye, Skipper." Morganson said with some doubt. Funny, the majority of this by-the-book crew frowned on pretty much at every decision Mark made, even if it was by the books. It might be his track record and the sanitization here and there by ONI. It also didn't help that he got promotions because everyone else was dead. A few moments during this tour, Mark had thoughts with the tinfoil hat. Why such the green crew? Sure, with the new ship comes the bring ups. But even in the cold depths of basic border patrol, other veteran sailors would be here. Obvious. It's because ONI wants to get him killed.

"Contradiction, move the ship to coordinates zero by zero by five by three by seven-three, port side." The captain ordered despite those thoughts. He turned to the ship A.I., standing on the holo-table going through screen after screen of information.

"Captain, I'm legally liable to inform you by law that we maybe _shouldn't_ move until Lord Hood is informed. It's only a couple lightyears away, through slipspace it'll only take a couple seconds." Contradiction said, always with that tone of condescendence and -only when one looked for it- hostility.

His blue, holographic curly hair moved with him, most of it matted under his Baltimore Raven's hat. He had a small build and a plain, white T-shirt that covered his body and jeans that covered up his dead brand of Nike shoes. He created his avatar to the appearance of a young guy in his early twenties. His face looked innocent with a strange underlay of fear. He crossed his arms, some passive sadist always happy to see Mark tortured with bringing up every protocol in the book.

Purely because of that, Mark wanted to move in even more.
"Understood, Contradiction. But I have authority to have free range movement as long as it doesn't break the seven kilometer hard deck."

"Cap, you know a hard deck is just a foundation of what is _suggested_? It isn't a smart idea to scratch up the border."

Right. Mark wondered how this pesky fourth generation AI made it past the orders testing. You would think ONI would scrap him for defiance. Three months with this AI, and Mark was constantly seconds away from taking a MA5D to shoot up his central computers.

"Fine. Move to coordinates zero by five by five over four, face pointing north in our frame of direction. Then get the scanner on that thing, tell me what you know. That is an order." Captain Florence said.

"No fun, Captain? I don't get it, ya know. Sure. Anyways, moving to coordinates, stand by."

In response, Mark just smirked.

The metals of _Legend After_ roared as the engines released more energy into the boundaries of space, skidding by the other two UN ships. Their engines displayed a dark, blue light, energized and ready to launch at the single press of a button. Small lights displayed the names of the ships in the interruption of darkness for identification. The few point-defense canons they had were cold, and set to resting position.

Mark felt the pressure increase. It became more of an effort for his lungs to merely expand. To combat this, the UNSC taught him breathing techniques. Small short breaths, otherwise his lungs might not have the strength to expand again.

"This is Captain Florence to _Shadow Man_, we're moving to hard deck boundaries_. __You have authorization to move converse portside_." The captain announced over the comm. as his ship made clear way.

"Copy that captain. We'll follow your lead." The commander of the research vessel responded.

The ship neared its destination, main engines deactivating to allow the ship's momentum to carry them. Soon enough, Reaction Control System Engines activated. Yellow flares ignited at the front of the ship, killing off whatever speed they had left.

"Weapons hot! Static-antimatter shields on with backups on standby. Get the _To the Right_ and the _Shadow Man_ to do the same_." Captain

Florence ordered.

To the Right had a few armaments, while the _Shadow Man_ only had weak static shields in order to block any space debris. Either way, the other ships followed his orders. The ships twisting in their own light. The rumbling of the deck as the drew to the nearest distant limit.

That's when everything went wrong.

Moments passed. The ship entering its intended position with slowed momentum as the RCS engines began to killed it. When the _Legend After_set_ itself into position, one of the sailor's scanners blinked red.

"Warrant Officer, what's wrong?" Mark said.

"Uhhâ€|.standby. The God's Key gravitational depression is slightly increasing in size.â€| Oh, shit."

"What is it?"

"I'm reading heavy gravitational flux depression coming directly from the object. It looks like a' black hole, sir!" The watchmen reported, almost straining his voice.

The emergency lights of the bridge ignited, amassing the dark room in red lights with a constant, blaring alarm. Crewmembers immediately awakened from their calmness, rushing to action stations, skidding and sprinting past each other, preparing for what they've trained for, only to be unleashed by the words of the captain.

Mark felt the pull of gravity centering towards the front of the bridge, as if tugging his captain's uniform. The RCS engines failed, and a new velocity was created not from their main engines but from the potential gravitational influence. The ship tugged downwards, pulling the rear of the ship upwards giving a scathed view of the artifact. Flares across the hull activated, as RCS engines aimed and shot down, trying to maintain original orientation.

"Captain, the artifact is starting to drag us in, along with the _Shadow Man_ and the _To the Right_. I'm reading a small electric pulse from inside the energy pool but that's it. Orders, sir?" Contradiction said, giving away only the same expression mixed with a hint of complete boredom. Trying to remain calm from the more uncontrolled and human emotions the Forth Generations possessed.

Something within the mindset of the captain wondered into a channel of unbound reality. The corrosions of engaged visions was thought only as shadows in the corners of sight from the rise of gravitation. Mark didn't speak, only looking upon the situation in a normal fashion.

Different sailors began to yell out details of the situation. Their voices became a murk of screams and yells to the captain. Only a few voices were audible, while the rest were seemingly replaced by whispers. Every whisper someone else, someone thatâ€|was part of his crewâ€|

"Captain, the _To the Right_ is loading the fifty millimeters. They are going to engage. The _Shadow Man_'s captain is requesting orders, sir!"

"Sir! Space-time curvature depression is increasing in size, the event horizon is expanding. Engines are losing control. Orders!"

Mark felt the pull of the black hole, causing the ship to drift towards the artifact despite the RCS systems and main engines.

"The event horizon is still expanding. We are two kilometers away and closing. Orders!?"

The ice broke off, falling to present the rings beginning to twist around each other, activating a small ball of dark blue and black light that continued to expand within. Blue lights ignited within those carved holes, replacing the black. With this conquest of space, the rings sped up raising to a speed constant out of control while the ship drew ever closer to the orbit of death.

"Captain, rings are increasing to eighty plus revolutions per minute."

Ordersâ€¦destroy artifactâ€¦.

"Sir, I'm reading another space-time disruption near the first black hole. Two black holes, sir, I repeat, twin black holes. They are morphing together, uhâ€¦standbyâ€¦"

"I'm giving it all she's got, Captain! We are one klick from our event horizon!"

Destroyâ€¦.

"Alright, both two-dimensional shapes are bending and forming together at their combined gravitational influence. They're forming a binary black hole orbit."

"Half-a-click out."

â€¦_Priority?_

Mark didn't respond. The corners of shadow throughout his vision. The horrors of the sailors with training disappearing every second, and only a single thought flung in the mind of the captainâ€¦a startâ€¦

"MAC on standby, sir! All weapons are hot and ready at your command."

Of your destiny.

"Captain! The shipmaster is going to engage without you! WHAT THE HELL ARE YOUR ORDERS, SIR!?" Contradiction yelled. His voice was filled with actual panic.

Mark Florence to this day questioned himself: why he didn't act sooner? Why of all moments, even during the atrocities of the Great War, did he freeze then? Yet it wasn't of fear, no, this was of

unknown. A blank unable to proceed in the proper steps of actions needed. For this, this grave mistake of idiocy, placed Humanity and Earth herself in danger.

Whatever the hell took ahold of him finally faded. He rose to be an officer of the United Nations, dutiful like every soldier. The sole duty to defend Humanity from any threat. Unaffiliated, undamaged by the ice grip he set upon himself

"We are a quarter away from the event horizon!" Morganson screamed, as she had been for the past five seconds.

Captain Florence was about to order for the ship maintain a symmetrical alignment of the nose directly towards the God's Key and have the MAC and all weapons fire at will. Yet the blackness of the void disappeared, replaced in the midst were bright blue colors. The ship's pitch, along with the roll and yaw, spiraled out of control within this stream, creating gravitation that rocked the ship worse than any engine transmission or hull breach could provide. The force knocked Florence to his knees, pulling him and other crew members in an array of directions. The captain quickly grabbed onto the rail of the holo-display, using all his strength to pull him towards the small table.

Through the hell of the bliss the Key started, once more they quickly entered back into the void filled with stars, all out of previous alignment. The ship moved from position, rolling out of control, and pushing forward. Yet within moments, the RCS engines activated, and the ship calmly positioned itself, staring towards the view of the two other UNSC ships.

And something else laid in the distance. It was surrounded by bursts of red and blue explosions...

Captain Florence stood straight, leaning against the holo-display and trying not to vomit, feeling a small kick within his stomach that tried to lift on. Contradiction, the bastard. Remained the same, purposely only showing slight sympathy by misplacing a curl of hair on his avatar.

The crewmembers also got up, pulling themselves back into their stations seats, trying to get the situation down with the sounds of groans, gagging, and along with the next course of gagging, creating splashes against the metal floor.

He took a few deep breaths. Head resting against the railing, trying to calm himself.

The captain panicked.

Even in the worse of the War, in the last days of Reach, nothing came over him like this. What would've happened if he ordered sooner to destroy the God's Key? Would the binary black hole orbit spread out of control and commence the vanguard group into spaghettification? The reviews, hindsight, constant regrets of what would've happened if he remained in the bounds of the UNSC Navy. He needlessly risked his entire crew of three starships, Humans from all walks of life thrown into the pits of an incompetent officer.

And from incompetence bore uncertainty. Where the fuck were

they?

The aurora of natural star light curtained the grey metals of the ships as the bridge got a full display of the solar system's yellow sun. The window darkened to counteract, creating a clear view of the black void and the distant stars

And

"Get me a status report" The captain quietly said, whether from shock, fear, distraught, or possibly all three was unknown. But he could say reality stopped processing in his mind.

"We are at unidentified coordinates, unable to accurately calculate location until I have a _definite_ point of origin. Not this ONI blind jump bullshit." Contradiction said. "I'm reading hundreds of gravitational depressions similar to the God's Key. They're showing a massive electrical pulse, but alternate current instead of regular direct. Massive beta radiation signals from each gravitational depression. I'm not getting an exact number on the depressions; they're showing weird signals when near each other. I'm identifying the God's Key about ten clicks behind us, producing the same binary black hole." He reported, as if there was nothing wrong. "Ship is fully operational, shields are at full strength, all weapons on standby, and fuel is at ninety-two percent. UNSC _Shadow Man_ and the _To the Right_ are green and combat ready. Okay, from weak distant gravitational influences, it's hard for me to tell the difference between density index and relative distance. I can calculate using blue/red light wave shift parameters and actual long-distance scopes to calculate celestial object position and possibly density, but it will take some time. For the moment we are completely blind. But, the visual views themselves don't lie."

The AI figure turned towards the view, which a quiet and dumbfounded crew was already looking at. The captain only noticed. Because what laid in the distance absorbed the rays of the solar sun, with skinny continents surrounded by seas of blue. It twisted to bathe in the sun, showing seemingly massive orange fires that were visible from space on the dark side of the sphere.

Surrounding the planet were the blue and red explosions that began to paint the bridge in their colors. It was unknown where they ignited from, appearing into existence as a ball, bursting, and then disappearing.

Fear and regret. This idiotic mistake that lead them to a dreadful, horrifying discovery that threatens Earth and Humanity itself. And it had to be them.

Like the beginning of the Great War, captains and admirals stood against the Covenant threat that wiped out billions in its religious crusade, placing Humanity near extinction.

What was it this time?

Nobody else moved, still taking in the planet. Contradiction tapped a screen next to his avatar. "Alright, Captain, I'm sending out controlled radar bursts. Each individual depression that isn't a planet centers a single space-faring, unnatural object. Each one is moving with random controlled trajectories, unnaturally moving

against gravitational influences. Source of gravitational depression reads the same as the God's Key: binary black hole, yet it isn't sucking the unnatural objects inside out, or doing anything that a black hole usually does, just like the God's Key. Let's see, it seems to be low-level visible light laser based weapons, but no high-wave for some reason, which would be more efficient. I might be analyzing this wrong. No, wait, this-

"Contradiction, what the hell happened?" The captain said, only shock. Stopped Contradiction from rambling on.

The AI sighed, opening up another computer screen and producing an image of the God's Key. Yet there were small alterations to the design. The end of the ellipse where it connected held a small hollow opening, thinning the connecting structures at the point where the only thing that could hold the structure together was the zero-g force of space.

"For onceâ€¦" The AI began. "I have to say for now I have no fucking idea. The God's Key created a binary black hole, which is one of the most powerful gravitational influences in astrophysics. From my point of view, excluding all the laws of physics the recent event defied, the black holes caused us to slingshot at a velocity that should've created massive gravitation and turn us flatter than a fucking pancake. We immediately halted from velocity, and all momentum was erased without any consequences from kinetic energy."

"The God's Key traveled with us?" Mark asked. "And why isn't the black hole sucking us in again?"

"At this point, sir, I'm not sure I would call this a black hole, since this thing isn't showing any usual gravitational properties of a black hole. Yet whatever kind of property matter it is, is unidentifiable at the moment. I'll continue to analyze, and possibly find a point of origin to calculate our galactic position. As for the God's Key, I'm not sure this is the same one. There was nothing indicating any ability for space movement, but maybe if the binary black hole sling shot it with us tooâ€¦. Either way, I'm glad you turned on the shields beforehand, otherwise we would've collided with a particle and been ripped to shreds."

Contradiction continued, ignoring any objections from the captain. "For the moment, I'm analyzing two distinct ship designs in conflict. One ship design bare similar characteristics to UN ships, with slight alterations in shorter length and height, but sharing the bulky and angular design Humanity favors. I'm reading sizes varying to single-manned fighters, hundred-sixty meters, five-hundred meters, to one kilometer. These ships hold the colors red and white with a shared symbol, uh, can't identify from the blue scope. As for the other designs, ships bare red and black colorings and look likeâ€¦Uh, standby, verifying on the blue scope."

Mark looked to the holo-table panels. Contradiction was analyzing readings of the planet's atmosphere, and results were processing. The surface itself seemed to be carbon base. But the areas where the orange light was most concentrated produced large readings of unnatural gamma radiation. When Mark looked back to the scorched world, he realized this was too similar to aâ€¦

Glassing.

A glassing out here? Another Covenant-like tactic used to decimate the surface of a planet. His mind moved on, trying to grasp something. Filled with constant classes of processing, mostly pessimistic in the possible future outcome of the situation, the reality hitting the captain in the chest again like a bullet. A terrible situation the United Nations never wanted to be part of again.

Maybe it was just his imagination, but his vision went slightly blurry for a few brief moments. And from the looks of the other sailors, they also had the same physical effect. To be this unlucky or brutally punished by God was unimaginable. It was worse enough for anyone else in the UNSC to encounter this situation, but for them, out of all thirty-one fleets of the UNSC Navy, and the thousands of space-worthy ships?

"Contradiction, check all local system formations, planet mass-density rations, and ship foundations with all UNSC databases." Mark said.

"Checkingâ€¦nothing, sir."

"I need you to be one-hundred percent sure."

"Checking againâ€¦nothing. Double-checkingâ€¦still nothing. Sir, there's nothing within the database. Can't be a hundred percent sure, so you never know."

The beauty of the planet paraded itself like a beacon among the chaos, baiting them to land upon its surface.

"Distance of nearest ship?" The captain said, trailing off.

"Nearest group, four depressions surrounding the first described ship designs about fifteen-thousand kilometers from our position. I'm picking up a series of gravitational depressions heading towards our ships in the form ofâ€¦wavelengths? It's going to take me a while to recode and make them compatible to our communications. Ships' engines are off and are running on momentum. Judging from the hulls, all ships seemed to have taken heavy damage."

Despite what the captain felt, nothing edged into his words except the confidence and emotional void the voice of every good commander of men possess. Just like what Florence should've been.

"Contradiction, scan and process all information you can. Send immediate threat assessment to Fleet Command through a slipspace transmission burst targeted to any nearby UNSC relay, priority X-X-X dash X-D directive, target assumed as hostile and extremely dangerous. Prep all weapons, and have static-antimatter generators online with backup static generator online. Triple fusion reactors on full energy output operations. Morganson, calculate local star formations with all known databases; Contradiction transfer processors to help her identify approximate location. Once completed, prep all ships for immediate slipspace jump."

The crew was silent. From hearing the words of their commander, it was final, undeniable. And no amount of training prepared them for this, to see the horrors of their parents, of their family members. The religious zeal of the Covenant glassed in colony after colony.

Because of this, first contact procedures were for immediate analysis of all xeno capabilities and technologies and file it immediately to FLEETCOM, then evacuate all UNSC personnel from the area to more suitable defensive locations. From immediate failures, Mark was fulfilling orders.

"Cap, are you sure this is first contact? Weâ€¦itâ€¦" Morganson trailed off, voice filled with shock and absolute fear.

"I'm sure, Ensign." Mark said, no sigh of impatience in his voice. "Forerunner artifacts has lead us here. We have no idea of their technological capabilities, so we have to consider them all a high priority threat-"

"Captain! Identifying new additional contacts, near the first group, two depressions surrounding two unnatural objects at two kilometers length." Contradiction reported. "Wow, that's a lot of twosâ€¦"

"Jesus Christâ€¦" One of the other sailors said.

Mark ordered for the scopes to show the situation. Half of the viewing glass formed up on the situation fifteen-thousand clicks out. The ships were near to what Contradiction described. Instead of the emphasis on thin and tall, these ships were only about maybe fifty to one-hundred meters in height and held a wider hull than UNSC counterparts. Two wings expanded downwards at a thirty-degree angle from each ship, painted with red strips running down the edge of the hulls. Something came in from their north, a black and red object only outlined and separated from the black void by a greyish tint that absorbed the rays of the sun.

"Contradiction, I'm about to look at the other ship design. What can you tell me about it?" Mark said.

"Uh, foundational structures are crafted almost like a spine, with multiple, bending metal vertebrae connected together which form a central structure connecting what looks like six movable tentacle-like metals. Christ, the thing looks like a literal giant squid. Standby, ship groups are interacting."

The new group appeared into view, and Contradiction's description was correct. The main structure near the upper region was like a crescent crown shaping with a thin, elongated body splitting apart into six tentacles, each moving like it held a mind of its own. Metal pieces, elegant and cut into harsh geometrical shapes, made up the lower region and outer curvatures of the crescent to the main structure, creating a sense of a completely flexible body. It was larger than the Autumn-class cruiser, yet thinner. Possibly providing a cramped and dangerous fitting room for the crew. But from their designs, these things weren't meant to withstand long-range combat maneuvers, especially with its plethora of bendable points. The tentacles reached back, acting like retractable wings as if drag were a factor out here in space. But it could be possible these tentacles possessed another set of engines for velocity increase. It was a designed knife, meant to move in close and slash the enemy apart. Any naval captain flying long enough could easily see that.

The other ships, unlike the menace this thing glowed, stopped mid-space without any visual evidence of RCS engines. The ships

turned toward the squid, blue flares igniting off the hulls of their ships, creating shreds of light that attacked their enemy. Those blue lights never touched the physical base of the squid, bouncing off whatever type of shield they possess. The squids returned fire, shooting a beam of pure red and black light in the midst of the tentacles under the bottom base of the main structure. Overpowering what little shields the ships had, the beam sliced through their hulls, quickly cutting them in pieces while fires burst from the breaches and was fueled by escaping air.

In only a few minutes, it was over. So quick that the first group wasn't even able to provide a tactical counter strike against an overpowering enemy. The squids still moved forward at thousands of kilometers per hour, moving like a fast strike group. The squids turned toward their own ships, twisting at an impossible angle without visible RCS systems and momentum that should've given the ship's crew a kick in the chest at the least.

"Captain, squid vessels are turning towards us. Increasing speed for what looks like an attack run." Contradiction said, moving a screen to show the closing squids.

The squids, showing their fronts, feared by all those who oppose them. Their tentacles folded back like flaps directing wind current. Smaller squids tagged on both sides of the larger ships, protecting the flank.

"Get that priority slipspace burst out now! Contradiction, can you calculate a slipspace trajectory!?"

"Negative, I have no idea where the fuck we are! Well, I mean I do but I don't. I just got the point of origin figured out from the grav influence from the last planet we are out. We are fucking far-out from Orion's Arm!"

Mark didn't really process what he said. Only we can't get to slipspace. "Get a tactical solar map of the system and recode those wavelengths; I don't care how, just do it, ASAP! Unknown planet is now down for orientation and movement guidance. Target MAC cannon at nearest closing xeno squid. Get me a horn on all free wavelengths, including slipspace, send out immediate handshake."

The red lights of the emergency alarm ringed again. For a brief moment, the sailors still didn't move. Whether it was from fear, doubt in their leader's abilities, or a combination of both will never be known. But whatever held them was quickly broken, and once again the crew members ready at action stations, turning on master arms for all weapon system and prepping for possible slight maneuver trajectories in order to avoid precision lasers.

The communications opened up, and Mark spoke. "UNSC priority transmission. This is Captain Mark Florence of the United Nations Space Command Legend After to unidentified vessels, remain at a five-thousand klick deck or we will use deadly force-

"INCOMING! BRACE! BRACE!" Someone yelled.

A pure black and red beam, uninterrupted from the void smashed against the hull of the Legend After. Photons easily passed through the gaps between the controlled antimatter atoms, slightly scarring

the hull yet reducing the possible destruction. The bridge vibrated, with the viewing glass transforming into a painting of outer bright red encircling black and dark red colors. Soon, it ceased, showing the planet and the explosions, space, and the other UNSC ships.

"Sir, static is at sixty-four percent, all other systems are online. No hull damage. Whatever that was, it defiantly isn't low-level light waves." Contradiction reported.

Christ Jesus, I beg of you to save us from another Great War.

Mark might've felt more confident in a _Halcyon_-class cruiser. While not exactly technologically advance or maneuverable, it certainly was able to take a beating.

As he thought about ships, it would've taken hours (depending where the hell they were, centuriesâ€|even if they were in the same century depending how fast they traveled for relativity to take into effect) for the slipspace transmission to make it back to UNSC space. He looked back to the other two ships. They weren't meant to take on a fight like this.

"Contradiction, tell _To the Right_ to go dark._. Make it get back to the God's Key and see if it can get back to UNSC space. We have to, or else the UNSC will be endangered. Afterwards get the _Shadow Man_ to do the same. Fire the MAC at the squid ship that just hit us! Three repeating rounds."

To the Right and the _Shadow Man_ reoriented themselves towards the God's Key. _To the Right_ completely disappeared as the _Shadow Man_ ignited its engines and began its trajectory.

Contradiction nodded, making pinpoint calculations based off the squid's trajectory that would've taken an average (trained) human minutes even with a calculator. The _Legend After_ shot one beam of pure yellow light surrounding a six-hundred ton slug, traveling at a perfect trajectory to the squid. The MAC round hit the squid in the center where the body spread into eight legs. The slug had little effect as it bounced off the thing's shields. The second slug though had more success. It punctured the shields of the squid and ripped off three of its bottom tentacles.

But it wasn't dead.

Another beam of light. Hit. Directly at the center point of the squid ship. The bastard's hull exploded in countless areas, turning it into smoldering metals.

The wreckage still traveled with the other squid at increasing speed and velocity. There was a bright blue flash behind them, directly from the God's Key.

"Sir, _To the Right_ is out of scanning range. I think they're through."

Thank Christ.

The captain quickly moved on. He had a simple maneuver against the other incoming squid. It looked like the squid's trajectory was

completely out of line with the _Shadow Man's_. And any small correction would kill the entire crew aboard the squid, or completely crush the squid ship altogether. The _Legend After_ could bounce eastwards using its starboard RCS engines. Then the ship can reorient itself perpendicular with a MAC trajectory contradicting with the squid's trajectory. It would be hit once, and the _Legend After_ would easily follow it afterwards for the kill

Mark saw something on the scopes. The squid did move. Despite every physical barrier that should've told it that it couldn't do that, the squid readjusted itself, firing a beam of light past the _Legend After_

It hit the _Shadow Man_. The ship, barely able to withstand small arms fire, collapsed immediately. The ship tore in half, foundations ripping apart. Fire erupted throughout the entire hull, fueled by escaping air.

Mark wasn't even able to process it, wasn't even able to figure out if there was any survivors. A mere moment later, another laser turned on them.

He felt the vibrations throughout the metals. A screeching sound traveled throughout the bridge.

"Shields down, hull integrity breached! Shit. Triple nuke reactors are cut off from main engines. We are stuck, Captain!" Contradiction said.

Five minutes? Maybe that's how long the battle lasted. This entire encounter. He felt the entire ship move forward from its uncontrolled momentum.

Mark looked to the planet, realizing there was only one way out of this mess. "Contradiction, fulfill perpendicular alignment to the squid's trajectory, front facing west. We're going to use starboard RCS engines to push the ship towards the planet's gravitational influence to get a distant orbit around it to readjust later and hook up with the God's Key. Fire everything we have at that squid bastard!"

Contradiction didn't even respond. Immediately, down was suddenly east became north and south became west. More pressure added, smaller breath intake. The ship moved sideways towards the planet.

The squid flew by, triggering off the MAC rounds. The first one ripped off the top of the squid, the crescent completely engulfed in yellow light. The squid still flew forward, with the front of the _Legend After_ following. Another MAC followed by Archer Pods and fifty millimeter cannon rounds. The squid was utterly destroyed. Mark swore he saw the squid completely turned around to face only onslaught.

"Cap, gravitational pull caught us. I can't maneuver to get us out. I can only reorient us with the RCS." Contradiction said. He brought up another screen. It shined red, displaying an emergency signal. "Uhâ€¦ negative. Negative. RCS can't be turned off. Our orbit's decaying right into the ground."

They were going down.

Mark didn't have time to even think.

"Contradiction, open up another line, all frequencies."

Contradiction followed. The horn was open. Mark spoke. "Mayday, mayday, mayday! This is Captain Mark Florence of the UNSC Legend After transmitting on all UNSC frequencies! We are going down by an attack made by unknown Xenos designated as squids as we made our way through Forerunner artifact designated as 'God's Key'. Our ship is going down on a Xeno garden world, coordinates, uhâ€¦9 by 0 by 7 by 6 by 1. As a captain of the UNSC, I'm activating protocol Winter Contingency. Cole Protocol will be fully enforced; I repeat Cole Protocol will be fully enforced."

Mark gripped the railings to the holo-table. "Contradiction, load all escape pods for immediate launch. We need to get everyone out of here ASAP!"

"What about you, sir? Or me, your most beloved and trusted A.I.?" Contradiction said.

Florence yelled. "You and I will be the last ones out. Once everybody, including us has bugged out, initiate Cole Protocol by destroying the ship."

"Oh, how I could've known." Contradiction frowned, then activated the ship's comms and announced. "This is UNSC AI Contradiction, now here this! To all UNSC personnel, we are evacuating the Legend After. Get to any nearby escape pods. Once all escape pods are full, launch immediately!"

Mark sighed with a small relief as he leaned on the holo-table, watching the ship head towards the world. Minutes passed by as the bridge window began to light up with heat and flame. Smaller breaths, heavier pressure. Shadows in his vision as it increased. It became hard to stand, forcing him to sit down on the metal floor.

"Captain, all pods are launched. Besides us on the bridge, the only other people are two Spartans." Reported Morganson

"Lauc-"

The ship bounced and fire spread throughout the outer hull as the ship entered the planet's atmosphere, providing a more detail view of the continents, partially covered by clouds and black smoke.

"You forgot to inform the Captain that we are in the planet's atmosphere." Contradiction said.

The ship's systems tried to combat it into a stalemate. He gripped the pull harder, to prevent himself from falling face forward.

"Looks like we're going down with the ship. Contradiction, did you plot a landing course?" The Captain asked.

"Sir yes sir, beginning myâ€¦.descent."

Mark said nothing and only leaned forward from his grip on the holo-table. The ship repositioned, front facing directly towards the planet at a forty-five degree angle parallel to the surface, flying lower and suddenly passing through low level clouds to skid past miles upon miles of rolling hills, filled with calm winds and green grass.

The scene quickly changed as they flew over a small river connecting to a lake, right next to a city.

He could see below that the city was almost in complete ruins, with every building either destroyed, on the verge of collapse, or with giant holes and fires in them. It looked exactly like an attacked UN city in the middle of bombardment by the Covenant. But in despite of all this, he could see the exchange of what looked like blue and red streaks of lights on the streets below.

Skirmishes upon the surface it seemed. Mark saw the movement of small transport-like ships as they flew through the buildings.

"We are seventy-five kilometers from surface. Uhâ€¦ETA: Damn fast. Hang on and pray to whatever god, gods you believe in, boys!" Contradiction yelled

Mark coughed up a round of blood, responding by calmly taking those short breaths. He couldn't hear anything.

Orders: Establish full First Contact Procedure and try to file full threat assessment to High Command and FLEETCOM. Maintain full enforcement of Cole Protocol at any and all costs.

Destroy: Any hostile threats as possible. Establish guerilla combat operations with a FOC.

Priority: Hold out until UNSC evacuation. If they aren't coming, then find a way the hell off this planet.

The green rolling hills neared. The ship flew over what looked like dozens of trenches and foxholes scarring the surface. It nearly missed a small tower that was set near an area of building structure.

"Incoming!" Someone yelled.

"BRACE! BRACE! BRACE!" The captain yelled.

Something struck the ship, giving one last twist of its pitch before crashing into a rolling hill

The boat hit the dirt, jolting upwards and leaving another force putting Mark fully surrounded by the shadow.

Harbinger of your destinyâ€¦|

2. The Race Begins

Aboard SSV **_Normandy**_** SR- 2****, 2186 Citadel Calendar, 09:05**

It was always the sterile air that hit him at first. Of course, after a couple of months you got used to it. But Commander Shepard never really got around to it. Every time he reboarded the ship back from a mission, it was like a slap in the face. No smell, no freshness, recycled.

It was always a strain. And it didn't help that Shepard was exhausted after every mission. Physically. Not even the constant conditioning and grueling combat scenarios in N1 through N6 and even N7 prepped him for the strains of barely two minutes of combat. Sometimes mentally, and emotionally. He wondered how some soldiers could go on barely affected by, say the similar events Shepard witnessed. How many times he held back in order to strike a deal. What had to be sacrificed.

At least this time the mission worked out for once in a life time, thank Christ. The Geth and Qurians, with the help of Legion and company, were able to broker an alliance against the Reapers. It was going to be rocky, sure. But as long as they aren't killing each other, openly at least, Shepard _tried _not to care.

But Legion was also dead. Another person Shepard couldn't save. _Does this unit have a soul?_ Despite the close call with the Qurian fleet, Legion sacrificed himself for his people. Shepard told him to keep uploading the data. What happened if he didn't? There could've been another way, God dammit.

At least his death wasn't in vain.

All Shepard wanted to do at the moment was completely collapse on his bed and fall asleep. Maybe. He wondered if he would go back to that forest. It wasn't frequent, but the thought that it might appear constantly kept him up, unable to even close his eyes. He didn't show it to the crew, for obvious reasons. Well, except for Liara. It didn't affect his combat ability. The adrenaline set him in line. He just wondered how long he can hide the dark circles forming under his eyes.

He had to check some stuff anyways. He entered the CIC from the elevator. He accessed his computer terminal. Another causality list on every galactic front. Few wounded. The Reapers had no mercy, no concerns, no other goal except the extermination of all life. He breathed in, trying to keep calm. Some other messages, they didn't matter.

His other crew mates had the same thoughts. They told him, as with the open door policy and, well, since they were friends. At the least, all of them were tired. Some held on as they pushed on through until they finally found the Catalyst to end this war.

He needed to talk to someone. Yeah. He'll head down to Liara's room. Hopefully-

"Commander Shepard, Admiral Hackett is on the QEC. It's urgent." Specialist Tranyor reported from her station, nothing in her tone that seemed to be affected by the war at all. She just continued to move screen after screen, typing in word after word.

"Thanks. Just type up a summary report of the Geth and Qurian and send it to the Admiral." Shepard said, a little disappointed.

"I'll give it to EDI. She can type it up faster."

He tried to run there, but his legs refused. They were numb, unable to process any major central commands. Soon enough they'll begin to hurt. He had to take another magnesium pill soon to subdue the exhaustion. He's sure that didn't have any side effects _whatsoever_.

He passed through the security screening to the war room. As usual, the two guards were talking about God knows what. Shepard didn't have the energy to listen in this time. Maybe it was a blessing this time.

He quickly entered into the QEC, pressing the answer button on the console. A blue figure appeared, dressed in a Systems Alliance naval uniform and cap with admiralty rank pinned over heart, shoulder pads with four bars across them. An old face that has seen and knows war, its sacrifices. Wrinkles and uneven skin. Bags over depressions from distance between cheek bones were under his eyes. He had a greying goatee and a scar traveling across from his lower right eye to mouth.

Commander Shepard saluted Admiral Steven Hackett, trying his best to be at attention.

"At ease." He said in his gruff and sad voice.

"Admiral Hackett." Shepard said.

"Shepard, I just received a rather brief report from Specialist Traynor. She certainly types fast."

Shepard guessed Traynor made EDI say it was her report. "Yes, sir. Both the Geth and Quarians are willing to supply their fleets and whatever ground troops they can spare."

Admiral Hackett only nodded at first. He stayed silent as he brought up another screen. Three objects appeared. "Shepard, you're going to have to give me the report later. There's another pressing matter."

"Sir?" Shepard said, with actual surprise and maybe a peak of curiosity. He felt whatever tiredness he had begin to slip away little by little.

"Around twenty-nine minutes ago we received strange reports near Illium. Scattered remnants from the Eighth Fleet were helping defend the planet against Reaper forces. They reported three unidentified vessels enter into the system through the nearby relay."

Shepard looked to the three objects. Each one had a displayed name on their hull, similar to the _Normandy_. Their names were UNSC _Shadow Man_ and UNSC _To the Right_. They were ugly as hell that was for sure. Tali might disagree, having grown up under the circumstances of living aboard a grey and bulky ship. They were thin, obviously more concentrated on height than width. Besides that, they weren't that impressive. They had a couple of armaments. A few point-defense lasers and long range batteries. But the third one however was odd. The UNSC _Legend After_. Heavily armored with dozens of defense guns,

a sturdy hull that who knows how thick. Its main battery looked like a giant hole at the top of the front of the ship. As Shepard observed more and more, he noticed there were dozens of small holes on each side of all the ships, seemingly jutting out.

Each one had a symbol. It was menacing black bird of some kind, maybe an Eagle or a Falcon, raising its wings in a similar stance of the ancient seal of the United States of America. A shield covered its body as the bird perched defensively over a sphere, most likely a planet, surrounded by a banner with the words 'United Nations Space Command'.

"I've never seen these kinds of ships before. And I can't say I ever heard of the 'United Nations Space Command'." Shepard said.

"It seems no one else at Alliance command has either. In any other situation this would've been brushed off, classified under 'misinformation', even with scouting reports from dozens of Alliance under the SSV _Cairo_ and Illium Defense Force ships. But what was in the reports caught our analysts by surprise. And the radio transmission that were forwarded to us confirmed our suspicions.

"When the three ships entered the system, they were immediately detected. They were spinning out of control, and the only realigned themselves with some rather primitive technology. SSV _Mombasa_ and SSV _Honolulu_ were protecting two Alliance carriers holding hundreds of refugees trying to escape Illium. The three ships were directly in their approach vector. The captain of _Honolulu_ ordered the unidentified vessels to move or be fired upon, but they didn't respond. Unfortunately, two Reaper capital ships intercepted them, and destroyed the _Honolulu_ only a few minutes later.

"I'm going to lay it on you at once. They then turned on the unidentified vessels. The battle only took a couple of minutes. The Reapers engaged, however unlike our ships, the _Legend After_ was able to withstand a direct hit from the Reaper's main cannon. The UNSC _To the Right_, after this attack, completely disappeared from visual and scanner view. _Cairo_ detected an immediate Relay jump. We can only assume it was the _To the Right_. The _Legend After_ counterattacked, firing off three six-hundred ton slugs from its main cannon in succession at a quarter of the speed of light. One of the rounds missed while the other two connected and completely destroyed the Reaper. The other capital ship easily destroyed the _Shadow Man_ with one shot from its cannon. It then turned on the _Legend After_, breaking through its shields and severely damaging its hull. The _Legend After_ maneuvered towards the planet at around two-thousand kilometers per hour. It used its main cannon along with pod type missiles and destroyed the other Reaper, then crash landed on Illium. When it was going down, it played this message in the form of AM and FM frequencies."

Hackett pressed a button on an invisible screen. A young and accent ridden voice began to yell. "Mayday, mayday, mayday! This is Captain Mark Florence of the UNSC _Legend After_ transmitting on all UNSC frequencies! We are going down by an attack made by unknown xenos designated as squids as we made our way through Forerunner artifact designated as 'God's Key'. Our ship is going down on a xeno garden world, coordinates, uhâ€¦9 by 0 by 7 by 6 by 1. As a captain of the UNSC, I'm activating protocol Winter Contingency. Cole Protocol will

be fully enforced; I repeat Cole Protocol will be fully enforced."

Jesus Christ.

Shepard couldn't say anythingâ€¦|

Aboard UNSC **_Infinity_**

150,000 kilometers **over Earth**

2557 Military Calendar, 09:00

Three days. Three days ever since.

For three days Master Chief Petty Officer John Sierra-117 did were eat, sleep, and look out the port window of the UNSC _Infinity_. Earth still rotated, showing Eastern Europe and the Middle East in its awakening from the dark. The globe was surrounded by the hundreds of ships of the UNSCDF fleet along with hundreds of SMAC stations. Sometimes, every once and a while, a ship flew by or a repair cruiser carrying supplies or wreckage from the previous battle.

Don't make a girl a promise, if you know you can't keep it.

Those words still echoed in his mind as if she were right there.

Now she's gone. She sacrificed her life for his.

Could you sacrifice me to complete your mission? Could you watch me die?

He failed his mission.

"Chief." A very familiar voice said, embedded with kindness and odd enthusiasm.

John turned around to face the tired eyes of Captain Thomas Lasky as he stood next to the entrance of the thin hallway. Small areas of grey hair and dark circles from the experiences during the Great War made him look much older than he really was. The sun of the Sol system landed on Lasky, giving way to his newly assigned uniform with promoted rank and holstered magnum. Grey body armor, raised left shoulder pad with spinal case.

"Mind if I stand with you? Again?" He asked.

The Chief nodded, still remaining in hopeless silence. Lasky stood at his left, placing his hands behind his back. He kept quiet for a moment.

Then finally, he spoke. "Europeâ€¦|Home of the old idea of "Western Civilization". Birth of modern day Christianity; the beaches seeing the beginning of the UNSC. My dad's ancestors were from the Middle East though, specifically Israel, living as Conservative Jews. That rubbed off onto my mom, but I'm not sure if I ever believed in it. Mom's were from Europe. Poland, near the Russian border as Eastern Orthodox Christians."

He wasn't sure why Lasky was telling him this, why he came all the

way over here from the bridge to lay on him his family history. His face quickly turned to the Chief, squinting through the provisions of sunlight and only nodded, turning back to the window.

"Yeah, both families moved to Mars about two hundred years ago? I don't know, it's just amazing we can trace so far back." He looked to the Chief, seeing that it was going nowhere, he frowned.

"Well, I obviously didn't come to talk about my family..."

Lasky trailed off. He knew the Chief was listening, it was justâ€¦ The Chief didn't know why he stopped. He changed topics. "How are you doing, Chief?"

The Chief said nothing, still staring at the home world of Humanity.

Lasky only nodded, looking out at the home world with him. "â€¦It might be too soon, and if you don't want to answer that's okay. But, ONI sanitized your records and tried to quiet it down that you're even alive, but I did some digging. There are a couple of old friends of yours that are actually serving in the UNSC right now. Lieutenant Chips Dubbo? Major Marcus Stacker? Major Jake Reynolds? All of them are serving with the Infinity. Reynolds is my security chief, Stacker is the head of the few ODSTs I have aboard, including Dubbo."

The Master Chief remembered them, the marines that helped him during the final effort of the Great War. It wasn't surprising. Out of the seventeen-thousand crew members of the Infinity, statistically eight-seven percent of them had served during the Great War. It was more of a symbol to the public. Heroes that defended Humanity in its darkest hour now leading Humanity in its brightest, "exploration" efforts. They even debated of assigning whatever Spartan-IIs were left, but Lord Hood decided that was a major misallocation of valuable strategic resources.

At least the number used to be eight-seven percent. After the Requiem Events, Infinity lost about a fourth of her crew. It would be a hassle to purposely pull out any Great War veterans from their positions all to merely play for the public. And, the Chief recently learned, there weren't exactly a pool of veterans left. The few military personnel that were left at the end of the War were offered a choice by the UNSC to either stay on or go home with full pension even if their required years weren't finished.

They got to choose.

As he thought about, on Requiem he remembered Major Stacker. Stacker helped him push towards the gravity rift on Requiem, but John guessed he didn't process his voice, thinking it was just some other order from another marine, nothing important to the mission.

The last time he saw Private Dubbo and Gunnery Sergeant Reynolds was on the Ark, which was only less than a month ago (at least to the Chief).

Lasky sighed. There was some wave of relieve that seemed to wash over him. "Chief, I have some good news for you. I might get in trouble for saying it, but-

There was a ringing sound. It was his comm. link.

"Christ. Excuse me, priority message from FLEETCOM." Lasky said. He exited the hallway for a brief moment, leaving the Master Chief to think.

He thought about Lasky's words before. Even though Lasky was a moralistic stigma within the UNSC, odd through and through, he still considered Earth home. Earth didn't feel like home. Lasky never saw it until he was an adult, and it felt like home. Ask the vast majority of Humanity, and they'll say with confidence that Earth was their main home. And because it was their home, Humanity and the UNSC will defend it to their extinction. So he had to tooâ€|

This place will become your home.

This place will become your tomb.

"-Chief, hey? You're okay, right?" Lasky said, standing next to him. He seemed a little worried, a lot more anxious. "You heard what I said, right? We have to get going.

â€|

The rest of the crew was brought in on Admiral Hackett's suggestion. Both James and Ashley saluted Hackett as they filed in. Tali didn't even say hi. She didn't act like it, but she was instantly drawn towards the three ships. Her glowing eyes moving from one ship to another.

Liara looked to him, noticing what was off. "Shepard, are you okay?"

"Talk to Admiral Hackett."

From the way he said it, they might've been thinking the worse. Did the Citadel fall? Were the Asari wiped out? Who the hell knows. They were timid to ask Hackett, and he responded by telling them the exact same thing he told Shepard.

And no one said a word for a long time. The humming of the ship became louder. The sterile air began to hurt Shepard's nose.

"Maybe I should ask the important question that is one everyone's mind." Liara said, moving towards the front of the room. "Is this first contact?"

Hackett took a moment to respond. "Honestly, I don't know. As you heard, they were speaking English perfectly from the transmissions we received, along with the words painted across each ship hull. Yet we have never seen this kind of technology before. Advanced, but using primitive spacefaring technology."

"These small little holes across the shipâ€|These aren't what I think they areâ€|are they?" Tali said, voice stunned, void of any sort of enthusiasm.

"_Cairo_ witnessed dozens of smaller engine emissions erupt from all sides of the ship, using them to balance out the force from their

main engines, or sometimes using them for main propulsion as evident from the maneuver flying past the Reaper. Reaction Control Systems at its finest. Ever since the discovery and usage of Eezo, RCS engines and systems became completely obsolete with the use of depression shift." Hackett crossed his arms

Tali looked from the ships. "Wait. Are you saying-"

"Yes. From the _Cairo_'s VI quick scan and from what we can tell, there was not a single trace of Eezo or dark energy of any sorts found aboard those ships."

"The other two ships are understandable using no Eezoâ€|for its size at least," Hackett continued, not even giving the courtesy for Shepard and his crew to process the news. "However, the _Legend After _is around a kilometer and a half long length wise, larger than our dreadnaughts. And, obviously, they can pack a larger punch than anything we can manage."

It took almost everything the Alliance and Citadel Security Force had to eliminate one Reaper capital ship. It took the half of the Qurian flotilla to beat a single, unimportant Reaper destroyer. This ship by itself destroyed two of them paying with its life. That wasâ€|almost impossible to believe. Three strikes from its main cannon, whatever the hell it was, ripped apart the Reaper to pieces.

And no Eezo. Almost everything within the galaxy ran on the Eezo element. For countless years, scientists tried to find an alternative with no prevail. And thisâ€|new species or organization or whoever they were, found that alternative?

It had to be impossible. A ship that size without any Eezo stabilization would completely fall apart. Using conventional electricity, even alternate, would require power that could supply an entire planet for centuries.

"What?" asked Tali even more surprised than the rest. "Thâ€|How is that possible? Every ship in the galaxy and every piece of equipment requires Eezo. We've become so dependent on Eezo it's become basic law. How did they even get through a Relay without Prothean technology to influence them? Or Eezo to make the trip for that matter?"

Hackett sighed. "We don't know. Our scientists are trying to study all the information we acquired, and so far they've made as much progress as you have. This is why we can't say if this is first contact or not. Such as the FM signals. We picked up their transmissions on the FM. They obviously had no idea what was going on and tried every way to contact us. And these messages were mostly about stay the hell away or be fired upon. They also sent inner ship transmissions through an unidentified encrypted channel, which we can't even begin to crack."

Shepard turned to Liara. "If this was some organization, you would know about it, right?"

She nodded. "I've been researching ever since Hackett explained. Nothing matches in my databases... Well, United Nations correlates to the old United Nations of Earth back in humanity's early efforts to unite itself. It collapsed however with the rise and gaining

popularity of the Systems Alliance. But I doubt that it's the same ones. The Systems Alliance would defiantly know about it. The only piece of evidence that makes us unsure at this moment, is of course, the English usage. Of course, they can't translate an entire language in the span of five minutes unless they had contact with us before or were watching us." She opened up her Omni-tool, shifting through various orange notes on the data tool

"With those invisibility ships, it may be possible for covert recon with absolutely no scanner or visual view. It makes it even easier without any Eezo emissions. How many of those ships do you think are around the Citadel, say? Tali said, back to observing every detail on the ship.

"Okay, well, I'm no scientist or ship technician," Garrus said, "but maybe we should talk about the crash landing message. Xenos? Designated as squids? Well, it sounds like they had no idea who the Reapers are. And what can be said about this Forerunner artifact?

"Designated as God's Key?" Liara said. "So they recently discovered this artifact. Wouldn't this contradict the theory they have always been watching us? They couldn't travel from system to system, not without the Relays. Or maybe they observed a single system until now."

"What's the assessment of their capabilities?" Shepard said, interrupting the three.

"We can't tell a lot from a two minute battle, but I can say the _Legend After _is a damn fine ship, even without Eezo. Their shields are evidentially a lot stronger than ours, along with their main cannon. As for maneuverability and speed, their about the same as our dreadnaughts if not a little less maneuverable. That's all we could tell.

"But for the moment we can agree there are still a lot of unanswered questions."

Yeah. The only thing they had on these guys was a captain named Mark Florence. His name, along with his voice, sounded human. Then again it could be a translator of some sorts with a copied off name. But what was Cole Protocol? Winter Contingency? He made a lot of effort to include those two things, and from the way he worded it, it almost sounded like a duty.

"And I can assume you want us to answer them?" Shepard said.

"Correct. From the report, the UNSC _Legend After _went down eighteen miles outside Nos Astra mostly intact. Escape pods are spread throughout the entire region. We don't know if there are any survivors at the crash site at this moment. Reaper forces are heading towards the ship's position. Shepard, I want you to take a ground team to the planet. Your first priority is that ship. Evacuate any survivors if you can, then secondary objective is to scavenge and recover any technology and information you can. Then move on to the escape pods. We don't know how many people these pods can hold, so it would be wise to have the _Normandy _on standby to make round trips. And third objective, if possible, is try to convince however these

people are to join us to fight the Reapers."

"Then, sir—is this first contact?" Shepard said, already knowing the answer.

"You tell me, Commander."

He remained silent.

"Sir, does the Council know about this?" Liara said.

"For the moment, no. Alliance assets immediately contacted me with this report. Illium Security Forces possibly sent reports to the Citadel, but it would just be white noise. The Council receives hundreds of reports every day. Hell, they might've received dozens of reports but classified it as misinformation. Either way however, whether it was me or the Council, the only asset we have to spare is you, Commander. But soon enough the Council will find out."

With stretching resources and men, the only few available resources to deploy on multi combat operations are Shepard and his squad and some Specter forces. Not a single fleet or ground division was left to spare. The Council tried to keep it very hushed for the public's sake.

"If they're uncooperative?" Shepard said.

"I have faith you'll somehow convince them." Hackett said.

Shepard couldn't help but get slightly frustrated with the little support from Hackett. _Somehow convince them? _It was already a hard road to convince an already known species's organization to join them. How the hell was he going to do that with an organization he never seen before?

"—If they're hostile—" Liara asked, leaning forward on the rail.

Jesus Christ. Shepard didn't even want to begin thinking of that possibility.

"Then you know what to do— But I sure hope that isn't true. Especially with those kind of ships. We already have our plate full with the Reapers."

"Sir, it's unlikely their people would just abandon them. What if they come looking for them?" She asked.

"If they don't come, take them to the Citadel. If they do, give them back any survivors you obtained and try to establish peaceful relationships, bring them back to the Council if you can. There, we may be able to form an official alliance to help fend off the Reapers. If they refuse to fight the Reapers though— It'll only be a matter of time before the Reapers turn on them."

"Will we receive any support?" Shepard said.

"Not on this one. ISF and local Alliance forces are spread thin. You're on your own."

A moment of silence before Hackett finished. "Any other questions?"

Everyone had a million questions, but everyone knew Hackett couldn't answer them. Or maybe they just didn't want them answered.

"Shepard, I know I'm sending you and your crew into the unknown, but we don't have time for more recon because of the Reapers. I have faith in your abilities. Get to that ship and get those survivors, if any. I want a complete report once your mission is complete. Hackett out." With that, his hologram walked away, disappearing and deactivating the QEC.

For the remnants of entirety, silence engulfed the shocked beings from reality until Shepard finally broke through. "Joker, set a course to Illium." Shepard said through the ship comms.

The Commander turned to the crew, with all but Liara and Tali looking to him as if he held the key for solving the mysteries held in darkness.

"So, assuming our luck and track record, all things are going to hell, right?" He said to try and lighten the mood.

"Ha, you actually thought things were going to go right?" Ashley said, smiling for once since the meeting began. "Are we at this point going to assume this is an "organization" based off English lettering?"

"Well, if they are a first contact, without Eezo, how did they find a Relay? I thought ships needed Eezo to find it and go through it." Garrus said.

"Well, Eezo is constructed from dark energy. The Reapers," Liara forced herself to speak the names of the true creators, "place the Eezo to have a lesser effect with gravity pull, thus making it almost invisible relatively. Most astronomers or astrophysicists would've dismissed it as a black hole, since Eezo properties tend to have a singularity effect. But if the Relay is activated, the Eezo within the structure would've cause a massive density flux, very similar to a black hole or binary black hole, which somebody might accidentally read it as. I won't go into detail, but the dark energy's mass effect doesn't necessarily have to be on a ship that possesses Eezo."

"In any event, somebody went and signaled them to come to us. Otherwise Garrus is right, they wouldn't have found it," She continued. "Unless maybe they did discover a Prothean cache and had no use for its technology."

"I feel bad they were suddenly attacked with peaceful explorations. You think this attack will make them more prone to hostilities?" Shepard said, feeling the correlation to the First Contact War. An unknown between two species ending peacefully, thank God. But this time, the Reapers offer no peace.

"Undoubtedly-" The Asari began.

"Their technology, Liara!" Tali yelled in the midst, pure joy, catching onto remnants of older conversing. "If we can scavenge any

technology we can, reverse engineer itâ€¦Keelah, imagine what we would learn, what we can apply to our own ships. Thenâ€¦ refueling stations would become obsolete. And if we held the strength of their shields and weaponsâ€¦" Tali ended off so soon, overwhelmed with the infinite possibilities.

Shepard nodded. "Right... Remember Tali, first priority is to evac any survivors. Technology is second priority. If we convince these contacts to align with us, then they can help us win. I would rather have that then spending time reverse engineering technology and spending God knows how many credits applying it to our ships while people are dying.

"Either way, can this possibly be a one of a kind ship?"

"Maybeâ€¦ Really, we can't say. The Turians have aboutâ€¦used to have about thirty-seven dreadnaughts." Tali said. "With the large size of this ship, especially without Eezo, I would guess they would only have a handful. Possibly even one."

Oddly enough, that was both reliving and troubling at the same time. Reliving whereas these people only have a handful of dreadnaughts, seemingly not as stupidly advanced as Shepard was beginning to think, and possibly, if they turn hostile, they won't have that many shipsâ€¦ Troubling, where they wouldn't have that many ships to help fight against the Reaper.

"Commander," Garrus said, somehow still sarcastic. "I think it would be best to send the two experts with you."

"Experts would be a misused term." Liara said. "But I guess I'm the closest thing we have. I've been studying Prothean ruins and cultures for fifty years, so I'm the best thing we got."

"If we meet any of them though, Citadel protocol usually doesn't work well unless we have power. Their ship was almost a kilometer and a half long, who knows how many crew members it held. But, to show our respect we should drop our weapons immediately, and try to actâ€¦as kindly as possible." Liara lingered on those words, possibly wondering herself what that exactly means. "If they can speak Standard English, then there should be no problem with communication, and tensions should ease, slightly at least. If all doesn't end up well, I could try melding with one of the survivors to quickly learn their language and some other important notes."

"Wait, you mean the kind of melding when youâ€¦" James began.

"No James, not that kind of melding." Liara responded in a patronizing way drowned in mockery.

"Sorry, that's the only kind of melding I heard of."

"There are different kinds of melding. Of course, you and everybody else in the galaxy are thinking of the melding you do when-"

"I think this is a discussion for another time, hmm?" Shepard interrupted, wanting to move on from the weird situation to the actual reality.

"Shepard, you should bring me along toâ€¦Yes, partially because I

want to observe everything to their shields to the ship's floor. But you don't know what's aboard that ship. I can try to access their systems, read through databases and unlock a locked door every once and a while. But I'll admit it's going to be more difficult than usual since their computers don't run on Eezo. It'll take some time to recode and make my Omni-tool and VI compatible; however it'll get me a good look at how their technology works." Tali said.

"Okay, we're all in agreement. Tali and Liara will be the first ones with me to meet this First Contact. We'll be at Illium in about a few minutes, we aren't that far away. Get to the armory and suit up."

So much for sleep. Shepard will live. How long is a-whole-nother question.

â€

Like that day five years ago aboard the Orbital Defense Platform _Cairo_, crew members stood at attention at their stations, surrounding the main stage with the large tactical computer screen. Forming around the main door to the stage was the one-hundred-sixteen admirals and generals of UNSC HIGHCOM, each one lined up and giving way to the thirty-six fleet admirals of Humanity. Each one wore the standard back uniform similar to Lasky's but with a different rank.

A single figure stood on the stage. He wore the traditional white naval uniform along with cap holding the traditional symbol of the navy. Medals were dressed over his heart along with the rank of fleet admiral on the shoulder of his uniform. A bald, aging man with a grim face void of any emotion, wrinkles and sternness spread everywhere. His eyes remained calm, turning to Captain Lasky and the Master Chief.

Lord Hood and HIGHCOM didn't say anything. They only saluted as the two walked down towards the stage.

"ATTENTION ON DECK." One of the fleet admirals yelled.

Once Lasky and the Chief reached the center of the stage, they both returned the salute to Lord Hood.

"At ease." He said. He turned towards the Master Chief. "Gentlemen, it's good to have you back."

If Lord Hood really meant it, Lasky couldn't see it, or hear it for that matter.

Lord Hood nodded to the other HIGHCOM members, who disembarked from the formal formation and turned towards the main tactical screen.

"Admiral, sir. I heard this meeting was urgent?" Lasky said.

"Yes, Captain. I apologize for the sudden notice, but this is a matter of Humanity's security."

Lasky nodded, understanding that nothing was more important. The Master Chief didn't say another word as the two of them stood to the

side of the stage and let Lord Hood have the floor.

"Under UNSC Law JAG 4456 slash LHG and Cole Protocol, no information shall leave this room unless to other commanding officers and personnel that are to partake in this mission." Hood began, looking to the officers of the room as they made no gesture of fault.

"A few days ago, we along with the Covenant Cell discovered another Halo Ring. With experienced knowledge with Forerunner artifacts, we ensured the safety of our scientists and military personnel with the application of extreme countermeasures in the event of the accidental activation of an artifact. One day after the Halo's discovery, the Covenant Cell's scanners picked up a massive gravitational depression that lead them to this artifact."

"This artifact, codenamed God's Key, is something that peaked interest in our scientists. It's nothing impressive as the Rings, being only fifteen klicks in length, and five klicks in height. Yet the Forerunner design was something of an add-on to a design from an unknown source, at least this is what the scientists analyzed based off previous Forerunner architecture."

He eyed Admiral Osman. Lasky could tell, since she was the only prominent snake in the grass within the particular group.

An add-on? Forerunners create purely off their own designs while Humanity built upon them. They built off of someone else this time?

Hood continued. "That's why only thirty-three minutes ago we sent three vanguard vessels to study and learn what this artifact is and what its purpose was. The ships are research vessel _Shadow Man_, Black Cat Prowler _To the Right_, and _Autumn_-class cruiser _Legend After_ as acting chief security vessel. We only provided these few vessels since they were the only available. We feared that the Elites would learn the secrets of the artifact before we did. Ironically, the ships were provided over watch from the Covenant Cell's Fleet of Retribution and the _Shadow of Intent._ The hard deck was set to seven kilometers with suggested minimum distance at ten kilometers. When the _Legend After_ passed the suggested distance edging on the enforced deck, something happened."

Tactically, that was the most idiotic move you could make. The Elites were trustworthy—at least to Lasky's point of view. But HIGHCOM and ONI had to rush in order to what? Make sure the Elites didn't learn more about the artifact first, even though they'll eventually find out? To Lasky, it sounded like something ONI and Admiral Osman would do, not Lord Hood. He wouldn't risk it.

The battle screen motioned forward, showing a momentary display of the Key rings encircling each other with increasing speed indicated by the tag calculating it up to thousands of kilometers per hour. It then showed the complete disappearance of all three ships.

"Covenant Cell scouts report heavy radiation and gravitational anomalies indicating pull in relations to a binary black hole. We identified this is not a black hole, or the common use of slipspace. What are scientists "guess" is this artifact in some way manipulates dark energy, thus affecting the gravity of an object. _Possibly_. But it seemed the artifact propelled them forward, oddly without recoil

force upon the artifact.

"Two minutes ago, Black Cat Prowler _To the Right_ returned to UN space from the God's Key, reporting on even more findings."

Hood removed the representation of the God's Key, replacing it with the image of a planet andâ€|.

Lord Hood motioned his hand toward the screen. "First Contact. Hostile."

Two images of two different ships appeared, obviously built by completely different species. One design looked similar to that of the UNSC's. The otherâ€|

"Yes. It is confirmed this is first contact, people." Hood interrupted through the silence. "The _To the Right_'s AI identified the planet as a habitable garden world, and that planet along with the xenos match nothing within the known databases. From the severe damage to the planet and the combat between these two identified fundamental ships designs, confirm a state of war between these xenos. And from the damages to the planet with hundreds of towns and cities under siege like a Covenant glassing, we can confirm that they have found and colonize numerous planetsâ€|Unless they're warlike beyond expectations, even beyond the Brutes, to destroy their only planet.

"_To the Right_ reports that they were attacked by this ship design. Two ships engaged, ranging in two kilometers in length. As expected, UNSC transmission didn't respond to their communication systems. The AI reported that wavelengths were being received in the form of gravitational depressions. Our scientists are now busy trying to find out how a wave even has mass, and it will take some time for the AIs to recode the transmissions. The AIs did send out handshake signals through FM and other wavelength signals. But whether or not they received the message is unknown. These ships, colloquial designated as 'squids'," Lord Hood pointed to the ship that looked like a squid...obviously, "engaged the UNSC _Legend After_. The head security chief and acting captain of the _Legend After_, Captain Mark Florence, ordered for the _To the Right_ to find a way back to UNSC space through a similar God's Key they found on the other side."

Another engagement with a hostile race would possibly put Humanity again on the brink of destruction. Humanity was almost wiped out from the war only five years ago, and if another threat of the galaxy dared raised its head against themâ€|.

God, don't let it be another Great War.

Humanity barely survived once. And it was mostly because of John. If they... If they were hostile, and they begun to attack the colonies...

Lasky looked at the ships. Two species. One with a ship so menacing it's something straight out of a video game. The other one howeverâ€|had no contact with the vanguard group.

And Captain Florence The name sounded vaguely familiar. It had something to do with ONI's blacklist. For whatever reason, the

captain was on it. For what reason Lasky didn't know, and more importantly it didn't matter.

Lasky momentarily removed him from the obligation of duty unto the sense of emotional input, looking to the others in the room to observe their reactions. Nothing passed over their faces except for the wave of sullenness that always seemed to carve itself in the eyes of leadership. However, Lasky noticed a few of them shifting their weight, slightly rocking back and forth.

"Till then there was no further contact with the Legend After or the Shadow Man." Lord Hood said. "If the Legend After and the Shadow Man were shot down and crashed landed on the planet, then we can assume both captains followed within military law and initiated Cole Protocol. Yet, we cannot risk on assumption that Cole Protocol was enforced. As all of you are aware, this xeno species has committed acts of war against the UNSC and Humanity by attacking those ships.

"As of this moment, I order for a main assault group outfitted for CQC 3D net defense warfare. I understand that it would be strategically wise to send out recon teams to assess the enemy, but time is of the essence. What we know from the To the Right, is that these squids maneuvered at speed rates unmatched by any of our ships. And judging from those tentacles, we should expect CQC engagement. But evidentially, these squids' weapons are outfitted for long range attack. The Legend After was hit multiple times from their main cannon at speeds much faster than our MAC cannons. It's safe to assume Captain Florence enforced the same long range assault tactics used against the Covenant during the Great War. Whereas that will work, I suggest for constant adjustment maneuvering. Maintain distance from these ships, and keep it that way. Our ships' strong suit and outfit is long range interstellar tactics, not close range knife fights.

"However, our ships won't be the first into the breach. Shipmaster 'Vadum's Fleet of Retribution is already standing by. In response to this event, they've called upon the Arbiter to assist with matters. From AI calculations, it'll take four hours for our battle groups to reach the God's Key. That is time I'm not willing to lose. I'm sending in the Elites to retrieve any and all Human survivors.

"For our combat group, task priority one is to ensure Cole Protocol is fully enforced by destroying all vulnerable intel. Making up this first battle group would obviously be as recognized by all of you. Battle Group Dakota; accompanied by the Ninth Fleet lead by the UNSC Infinity under Captain Thomas Lasky. Admiral Alvares." Hood looked to the fleet admiral of the Ninth. "You have control of the fleet; Lasky will control the battle group. Admiral, you are to establish a foothold around the Key. Lasky, you are authorized with complete operational freedom in tactics on both the ground and in space as you see fit as the advance unit to fill out priority one. Alvares, I want a ship going in and out of the Key on thirty-minute interval updates.

"Once this objective is completed, Captain Lasky you are to establish foot holds on the planet if possible, and advance territorial control. Admiral Alvares, hold position from there until my arrival with the Tenth and Twelfth. After that, I will personally take charge of the mission. Fleet Admiral Jay Harper as my executive officer will

take command of the UNSCDF in my absence

"If the enemy's capabilities prove to be beyond ours, then you are ordered to eliminate any UNSC artifacts in the systems at _any and all costs._ Then you are to evacuate to the God's Key, and retreat. On the other side near the Ring, we will destroy it to ensure these xenos will never find their way towards Earth whatever means necessary, and prepare for colonial and homeworld defense.

"Any questions?"

Hood ended his briefing, maintaining hands behind back and waiting for such response.

"Admiral, sir." Fleet admiral of the twenty-first fleet began, still with the entire room devoted to Hood. "I thought Captain Lasky was to lead the opening Requiem front."

"Lasky is commissioned with the lead of the _Infinity_. And with an unknown xeno force, we need to show the enemy the true superiority of the UNSC. But if this unknown life form is technological superior to us, then we need our best ships to hold off. Fleet Admiral Rebekah Takeda of the Fifth Fleet will take on as director of operations of the opening Requiem front."

"The Covenant Cell, sir? Can we really trust them to run a joint operation? As well as evacuating Human survivors?" Another admiral said.

"Even though our relationship is rocky, they can most defiantly be trusted alongside for their uncanny loyalty in combat. While I understand all of yourâ€¦opinions on the matter, we need them for the time being not only for this event, but also to find the remnants of the remaining loyal Covenant and their home worlds."

"Sir? Why didn't the _Legend After _send a distress signal through the E-Band?" A general asked.

"_To the Right _reports the God's Key transported them to an unidentified location. The AI performed mathematical analysts and confirmed the location was far out of the Orion Arm, thus making it impossible to connect to a UN radio beacon, and if they sent a radio burst it would take thousands of years to reach us."

Out of Orion Arm? How is it possible this artifact transported them almost thousands of light years in regular space. They would have to be traveling faster than light, which is literally impossible, defying the foundations of physics set up by Einstein. Either way, they weren't killed in the process? No kinetic momentum that would've taken possibly centuries to decelerate from?

"And, Admiral, sir. Should all xeno life be considered hostile?" The same general said.

"All xeno life is to be considered and treated as hostile. Any and all aliens that dare interfere with the United Nations Space Command are to be eliminated with extreme prejudice. All cities found are to be razed and populace eliminated. Nuclear weapons and in-atmosphere MAC use on planetary surface are authorized."

Hood's words seemed to rain down forever. Yet no one took this out of line but to heart with the preservation of the Human race against this threat. Captain Lasky looked again the diagrams of the ship designs displayed on the battle screens, and then spoke.

"Admiral. We've confirmed two ship designs thus possibly two types of alien life forms. Only one ship design engaged UN ships while the other did not have definite contact. What if in the event the other life form proves friendly to the UNSC?"

Everyone immediately turned from Lord Hood to Captain Lasky, no one saying a word. Each one perplexed by the proposition. Lord Hood also turned towards him, facing away against the tactical board and the crowd.

And it seemed a long awkward silence arose before he spoke "In the event of friendly contact, maintain Cole Protocol and keep your distance. Do not engage unless fired upon. Captain Lasky, you are not to intervene in their affairs until reinforcements arrive after you complete the first and second objective. If necessary, I will arrive there myself for further diplomatic arrangements.

"Then it is: All squid contacts are to be considered hostile and to be eliminated. If any squid civilian cities or other major centers are identified, then local populaces are to be wiped out and cities razed. This other ship design that belongs to whatever race, are to not be fired upon unless they fire first. Do not take them as friendlies, but neutrals until definite contact. Initiate First Contact Protocol in the event if there is premature contact."

"Sir. What ground forces will I be receiving?" Lasky said.

"In the possibility of AA defense platforms on the planet, I'm dispatching the 19th ODST Been under command of Colonel Edward Buck and XO Major Jonathan Cortez. As for the _Infinity_'s security team, I'll let you decide who should get R and R for the time being, and resupply men and materials wherever you need before you ship out. However, I'm pulling in all your Spartan-IV teams including Commander Palmer.

"In the event of specialized missions, I'm placing the Master Chief under your command. We need a Spartan-II present, especially against a threat like this. And no other Spartan-IIs are available at the moment, with them spread across the galaxy."

No... The Master Chief can't be immediately redeployed, not after something like this. He just lost Cortana. Lord Hood knows the importance of her, what the hell is he doing?

"Any other questions?" Lord Hood said, seeing nobody else spoke up. "Gentlemen, we are now on full alert at DEFCON 3 for full mobilization within zero notice. Report to action stations on standby immediately. Full situational reports will be sent every hour.

"Dismissed."

With that, HIGHCOM began to shuffle out back to Sydney or with their respective fleet. A brief meeting for such a relatively brief event. Lord Hood told both Lasky and the Chief to wait for a moment as he

stepped toward the crowd. Admiral Osman seemed to be waiting for him.

From observation of afar, she remained respectful to the officer who could permanently silence her at any moment. Osman saluted Hood, who nodded at the at ease.

Navy looks after their own against the only internal enemy. Captain Florence was no exception.

Therefore she moved her mouth in the form of a proposal, more or less an accusation. Despite the signs to withhold in patience, Lasky stepped down from the stage towards the two, possibly with more important intentions. He told the Master Chief to stay there, feeling guilty as he said it. As he walked, he realized something. Lord Hood never mentioned word of the Office's activities in the new incident. They would've played a major role in the development and processing of intelligence on the first contacts; in fact Lord Hood shouldn't have been the one to relay this information, it should've been Admiral Osman.

"-miral Osman, this is an assigned target for High Command. For now, you and the rest of ONI command _will_ return to Sydney under _my_ direct orders. And get this through now: The Office is now under my direct authority, from every little hidden surveillance agent you have aboard our ships, to your Spartan secret operators, to your office janitors. Do you understand, Admiral?" Hood said, permitting whatever emotion need be to relay the message across

Lasky approached the two, causing Hood and Osman reinforce attention to the captain. The captain stood at attention but Hood quickly told him at ease. Osman looked relieved, unfortunately.

"Captain Lasky, I wish you luck on your mission. Those men trapped on that world are depending on you and the Elites. Butâ€¦I know you'll do well. Your mother would be proud." Osman simple said, turning to Lasky and signifying her release back to Sydney as of a close friend instead of a superior to a grunt.

Lasky nodded, saying thanks to Admiral Osman and letting her go without any objection. Seemingly like everyone's dead family members, Brigadier General Lasky died during the ending of the War as commander of the Marine ground forces in Voi.

He turned back to her one more time, then faced Lord Hood. "Since when did she care for the lives of other Humans?"

"Captain Lasky, I didn't have time to congratulate you on your promotion. You control the most advanced ship Humanity has ever built. Believe or not, that control comes with a lot of power. So much so, the Admiralty has elected you as the technical one-hundred-seventeenth of UNSC High Command. I welcome you. I also didn't inform you that Captain Andrew Del Rio has been executed earlier today."

Lord Hood said it so casually it caught Captain Lasky off guard. It wasn't a lie, Lasky wasn't fond of Captain Del Rio. Age and arrogance placed him as a faulty leader. But to have him executedâ€¦ He only did what he thought was right, to save his crew. Yes, leaving the Master Chief behind, Lasky will never forgive him. But by UNSC law,

he did fill out First Contact Procedure by breaking Cole Protocol by leaving a highly valuable asset behind.

"If I hadn't known already, what cooperation do you need with me for the Chief?" Lord Hood said.

Lasky wasn't surprise, besides the Chief there was really no reason for Lasky to go up to him. "Sir, you read the psychological reports of the Chief compiled by ONI. And you damn sure know what we found in the wreckage will help him."

Hood nodded, looking over to the Chief who stood perfectly still. It was frightening to watch him. Hood walked towards the Chief, Lasky following him.

Once they both entered onto the stage, facing the Chief, Hood saluted him and the Chief saluted back.

"Master Chief. I'm sorry for the quick reintroduction back to the UNSC." Hood said, as he shook the Chief's hand.

"Sir."

"How are you doing, son?"

"Green, sir."

Hood nodded, almost sympathetic. "I read the report on Requiem. Cortana was a great asset, for both you and the United Nations. I understand her death isn't easy for you, but you must understand, Humanity is in danger right now, we need everyone we have at this moment."

There a long moment of silence from the Chief. "I understand, sir."

At times Lasky didn't think Lord Hood didn't understand the Chief's condition. But Lasky hasn't exactly helped. There has to be a point where Lord Hood realizes he didn't save Earth for Humanity or the UNSC, he saved it so Cortana could have a chance.

Then again, Lasky doubted himself on this. To do this much for personal reasons sometimes seems beyond Lasky.

"Master Chief, I can't say I understand what you're going through. But we need you." Lord Hood sighed. "I wanted to withhold this information from you until we have a direct plan. But, we believe our scavenger teams have found something within the Didact's ship ruins. I'll let Captain Lasky fill you in on it."

"_Later_. The UNSC _Infinity _needs to close up shop in forty-five minutes in order to make the deadline. Report to your ship, there Lasky will tell you."

Again, another long moment. "Yes, sir."

With that, the Master Chief didn't even salute, he exited the stage and walked out the main entrance, towards the main hanger.

Lasky wondered if the crowds will bother him again. When they were

walking through, dozens of people did double takes, wondering if they saw who they really saw. They talked among themselves, arguing whether the leaks and rumors were true or if he was supposed to be dead.

Also, that was an elaborate way to tell the Master Chief to go. Why even bring him here in the first place? Lasky could've easily left the Chief, partake in this meeting, then inform the Chief. Why did he even need to be here? To raise the morale of HIGHCOM that their most vital _asset _was back and in action?

Idiotic beyond belief. Despite the vast intelligence built upon years and years of historical wisdom and removed of any bureaucratic, democratic or any sort of political incompetence, HIGHCOM was still human. And they didn't understand the problems going on here. How could they? The UNSC was built upon the foundation of first dedication to Earth and Humanity.

"Sir, you aren't going to tell him?" Lasky said. "Why even bring him here?"

"I was held, Captain. I was the only one present to coordinate the defenses during the battle while the rest of HIGHCOM was planetside. They wanted to see him for themselves. Admiral Osman classified the Requiem Events even from them."

So was that what the conversation between him and Osman about? Still though, he was the supreme commander, a strong one at that too. He should've have told them to screw off.

"As for the other question, it would be better coming from you, I personally believe. He trusts you."

"But, sir, you're still pushing him out on the field. What the hell am I going to say to him?"

Again, he nodded in understanding before speaking. "Before I answer, let me ask you, Captain, you know the Master Chief better than anybody else besides Sergeant Major Avery Johnson and Cortana, who are now dead, may the Father give them rest. Without Cortana, what do _you _believe will happen?"

Lasky took a moment, reviewing thought after thought and report after report. "The Master Chief grew a strong emotional attachment to Cortana over the years. Now with her gone, he broke through his only attachment to his "training". I _suggest_ we just keep him here, for the time being. Maybe give him some psyc evaluation."

"To ensure he doesn't go AWOL? To say the least, is there a way for the time being to keep his mind off Cortana and to stop questioning orders?"

"What? Sir, with all due respect, with everything John went through, there isn't exactly a going back option. There's no restart, no checkpoint to respawn from. Besides, sir, he's a Human being in the end, not some robotic machine like many people believe he is, or some perfect soldier. For God's sake, after all this, all he's done, you're putting him back on the field? I wanted him to gain back what was left, gain back Cortana somehow, _so he can live the rest of his life in peace_. We have enough heroes now, sir."

"As much as you hate to admit it, Humanity needs the Master Chief and the Spartan-IIs. These Spartan-IVs are nothing near the Spartan-IIIs, and the IIIs are regular grunts compared the IIs. The Didact proved three days ago we are still at our weakest despite the numerous technological upgrades throughout our fleets that now match us to the Covenant. All of our combined defense fleets stood no match against a Forerunner ship, and the only one who saved us was-"

"The Master Chief, sir." Lasky replied in sullenness.

"Now he is one of the last few surviving Spartan-IIs and IIIs. He's better than the best of the best. He needs to serve. And, Lasky, if he'sâ€¦fixed, what do you think will happen? You're just pushing for the Chief to get back into the field too whether you know it or not."

Lasky didn't respond, looking down at his black boots. Oddly enough, he never thought about it, but HIGHCOM would never let the Master Chief go this easy. Yet all he himself wanted was the Chief to, well, to not travel the path of desolation so many have rotted down before. Prelude to the destruction of himself already broken by Doctor Halsey those so many years ago. On a whisper who knows the lengths he'll take in order to bring her back.

"Sir, in his state right now, I'm not even sure if he'll follow my orders, or anyone's for that matters. Through the digital boxes in his suit, we know Cortana spoke some veryâ€¦non-programmed words to say the least. Beyond a doubt, maybe not now but overtime the Chief's mind willâ€¦corrode to Cortana's side, maybe even consider the Didact's words." Lasky said, revealing tactical instability vainly shrouding last attempts to convince the Admiral.

"Walk with me, Captain." Hood said, guiding Lasky to the mostly cleared out room only left with the assigned personnel. Both entered the hallway, with a clear viewing glass unto Earth.

The reflection of the sun painted their faces and left their lower bodies in shadow along with the floor. Hood kept his entire attention to the homeworld.

"Captain, Humanity has proven time and time again that chosen individuals must sacrifice everything he or she has in order for others to live on. That is a part of war, and war never changes. Humanity sacrificed many of their freedoms during the War in order for survival. And Humanity is nowhere near close from extinction, yet once it's safely away from its grasps, then the UNSC can finally release control knowing we have completed our assignment given to us by the UEG almost thirty years ago.

"We must fight in the dark so others shall never have to. We, as soldiers, are Humans who chose to sacrifice everything we have, including the personal freedom of others so thousands of years later, when you and I are long decayed into the earth and Humanity is spread on thousands of colony worlds, safe, when the name UNSC is now tainted with the atrocities we had to commit in order for those decedents to be there, we will know proudly we served our duties. You and I, nor the Chief, are given the luxuries that those others are given. And that's out jobs. We kill so others never have to, we commit atrocities so others never have to, and we put our feet on the

line knowing we may die so others shall never have to. The Master Chief never made a choice; ultimately "fate", "God", whatever you choose, chose him fit for service. Yet what he suffers through now, no one afterward shall ever suffer through.

"Lasky, take note that nobody takes John's service to Humanity for granted. Without him, none of us would be standing in this room today, none of those generations decades later can look back and shake their head in disgust at the Spartan Program.

"For the moment, I personally believe he is still fit for service as long as you are there with him. He trusts you, especially after everything you've done. If you tell him about Cortana during the trip, I believe he'll follow your lead. Either way, I can easily get what you require. I agree, in the longer run John will think on Cortana's words and in time go AWOL. Despite Admiral Osman, the HIGHCOM board along with the full support of the Navy is willing to do whatever it takes to have John back to full strength. He's the best soldier out of all of us yet the only one who broke what you would call, captain, "indoctrination"."

Lasky already knew the information Hood relayed, already built into most minds of UNSC personnel with indoctrination training. Whether though this was true or something of false hope seemed to blur with Lasky as the days passed by. A blur whether it's only for power or actual duty to the final words of the UEG before their nullification and disbandment.

"With respect sir, it basically was." Lasky responded.

"Whatever it was, Humanity at those time were desperate."

"I know, sir. But when will the day come that we can release soldiers like John? How will we know when were safe?"

"We will know when we can take care of ourselves without the intervention of the Master Chief. The generations after us will give homage to the Chief. Sympathy perhaps for what he was forced to sacrifice, for what others sacrificed for him to become the soldier Humanity needed him to be."

Lasky didn't respond, looking out onto home. The birthplace of those billions of peoples throughout Orion's Arm. A sanction of violence, instability, and otherwise disgust before the rise of the UEG, the UNSC, and CMA, all configuring into an odd time under the direct control of the UNSC. Still, this world, and her people have seen so much blood, combat, insecurity—and in those final days of the War, the worst it has ever gotten, only a few years later did these same people journey once more unto the breach.

Despite the UNSC's efforts, the work of Humanity, it would do no good. The Master Chief wouldn't be the last one to undergo the sacrifices, neither would Lasky, or any other soldier matter-of-factly. The Master Chief will be forgotten one day, or categorized into the thousands that played a vital role in Humanity; Siddhartha, Caesar, Battuta, Da Vinci, Medici, Zheng He, Elizabeth I, Joan of Arc, Washington, Zedong, and so on. But maybe he'll be highlighted, being the first to pull the entirety of a united Humanity from destruction, not of political or cultural influence, neither for the war of single empires, but for Humanity.

The soldier Humanity needed him to be. The hero need not speak for when he is gone the world shall speak for him. If Lasky had to guess, that would be the phrase Humanity would describe John as about a thousand years later to some class of kids who don't have to care. Or more likely, they'll forget the extent of the situation as most people have with history. They have almighty high insight, they'll be going on and on how _they could've done it differently_, or _they didn't need to do this. There could've been another way._ And hell, maybe they were right.

"Aye, aye, Admiral." Lasky said, still staring unto the blue and green station.

â€|

"How long until our agents reach the location?"

"Approximately an hour. I'm sure you read the compilation reports?"

"Indeed. They sure didn't make a quiet entrance. No doubt Shepard and whoever else the Council can scrape are already on their way."

"And in the event if they align with him?"

"That could be a possibility. But our ideals are too similarâ€|too correlating. They'll see our side and join us like that."

"My teams are readying now, and I'll be off myself to the location. Any last orders, sir?"

"Yes; I know Shepard will no doubt interfere in your affairs, but do not engage. It'll worsen relationships to engage another human. Yet I understand time is purely of the matter, and this makes this operation the most dangerous one you've taken so far."

"I understand, sir."

"If you can't make this work, then pull back with everyone else immediately. Their alliance is not needed in the event."

"Sir?"

"At this point in the plan their allegiance is unnecessary. I've known this for a long time. But no doubt it would be a tremendous help if they _did _align with us. But events are rolling in motion so old that it's incomprehensible. Now leave. Operative Charon will make sure your teams have their assignments."

3. Bombs and Rain

Aboard UNSC *_Legend After, _***bridge**

On garden world surface

2557 Military Calendar, **09:15**

Mark had to wake up on his own. A knife of light and blurry vision as

he opened his eyes. He felt something lodged in his right arm, numbed and shaking. His lungs had trouble expanding, probably a side effect from its strange use under increased gravitation. Most of the ceiling covering fell off, revealing the clusters of broken wires and other destroyed systems.

He lifted his head. The bridge was littered with wounded and dead as the few able-bodied tried to tend to them. They were merely astro-navigators and mathematicians, only able to insert the ugly yellow-greenish tint of biofoam filled in gaping holes and try their best to monitor heart rates. Contradiction's avatar stood on the holo-table, arms crossed with a blank expression.

"Ah, Christ, sir, you're awake!" Morganson said. She left one of the other sailors to tend to a critically wounded. She held out her hand to the Captain, helping him up. "Contradiction is trying everything to get ship defense systems online, but he isn't having any luck. Most of the crew got out in time, 'cept for a few essential personnel throughout the ship. There's about thirteen of us left, including two Spartans, five of us are wounded."

"How long was I out?"

"About ten, fifteen minutes?"

Mark looked to the bodies. Bloodstained and blunt trauma wounds caused by some impact of a bridge part. You never really got fucking used to it. During the War, you always saw the piles of burnt bodies and the dead scorched with plasma wounds. It hit Mark with fear, but after a while you just overcame it, then it became this painful numb.

Five years? Five years since the last major attack against Humanity - well, technically three days, beside the point. - five years since carcasses filled up ships and streets. Five years since Mark had to witness mass killing. But there were more important priorities to ascertain.

He tried to shake off the dizzy feeling, vertigo, and other sicknesses associated with a crash landing. He was gaining ground, taking it slow for a moment.

"What about the other pods? Did you get contact with them?" He finally said.

Contradiction stepped forward to the Captain on the holo-table. "No such luck. By the way, thanks for asking how I was doing. Dick. Anyways, there's a lot of interference, signal floods on encrypted channels, and those gravitational depression wavesâ€¦ Christ. I did have their trajectories calculated before launch, but with no available intel on planet topography, there might be slight inconveniences, but nothing that should be too major."

"Are you suggesting that we abandon ship to search for survivors?"

"Well, Captain, this ship was outfitted for border patrol. We don't have any ground assets besides a few Warthogs and of course the standard, required infantry armaments, which God knows how long it will last out here. Either way, I'm reading little squid bastards all

over the place. Of course their gravitational depressions emitting beta radioactive decay. They're about one-hundred-sixty meters in length, one-hundred klicks out from the ship, maybe four of them, approaching the ship by walking on its tentacles, of course. ETA: twenty-seven minutes?"

"What? Why the hell didn't you mention it before?" Morganson said.

"Right, look, nuclear reactors aren't responding, and I'm running it on conventional alternate current at a couple dozen gigawatts, ain't exactly enough to power a warship. And right now, I'm using most of that electricity to prevent the nuclear reactors from going nuclear. I only have short distant radar for the moment."

What about the wounded? Two of them were in critical condition, and needed medical attention soon. Hell, they might not be able to move them in their condition. There was also the ship to think about.

"What about Cole Protocol? That's our first priority. No way in hell we're letting a ship, man, or fourth generation AI fall into enemy hands. Contradiction, what's left of our nuclear stockpile? Can we use the nuclear reactors?"

"Ah, I like your thinking, Captain. Enough Shiva-class and HAVOK tactical nukes to level Hiroshima fifty times over, a couple of thermonuclear bombs and one Nova bomb. Ideally however, working in fallout or the center of a star isn't the best strategic option. A few Shiva nukes will do the trick. I can hard-seal the tripe nuke reactors with the emergency lead casing to prevent a large fallout spread. Fallout spread will be limited to a few klicks top, nothing I can do about the EMP spread however. As long as we have the power on low we should be fine. And our boys' communications systems are built with a higher electrical input to purposely combat EMPs."

"Right. Morganson, call the other essential personnel. Try to move the wounded, including the critical ASAP. We have no choice, and we aren't leaving them behind. I'll help. We'll meet up in the armory, gear up and stockpile as many weapons as we can, then load up in two Pelicans. Morganson, you take one of the Pelicans with the wounded and other sailors, lock on to a gauss hog. I'll take the other Pelican with the two Spartans. We'll use mine to try and load up other survivors at the pod landing sites. Morganson, you stay on my ass in a safe holding pattern. Try to provide limited fire support and get ready to drop the hog just in case."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

"Contradiction, get those pods on frequency, and raise the hell out of every UNSC encrypted channel. We need to get a full threat assessment back to Earth and find a way out of here. For now, we need to find a safe place to hold out, gather our survivors and resources and hope to Christ we get home."

There was another possibility. If there was no ride home, then it was there job to ensure that whatever, whoever these xenos are, aren't a threat to Humanity.

"Contradiction, stack up a few HAVOK and Shiva nukes for transport."

We might need them."

"Aye, aye, sir. There always something that needs blowing-the-fuck-out of."

â€|

BR85HB SR Battle Rifle. Orange and grey, completely shiny, and never been fired once. It wasn't Mark's favorite choice but there was no time. The seven sailors loaded up the wounded, with constant complaints through groans and screams. It wasn't pretty, constantly reapplying biofoam to hold the criticals in one piece. Blood dripped from the Pelican's cargo hold and was always filled with a heavy, panicky breathing.

Christ knows how long they'll last without medical attention. They were barely being held in one piece.

Mark, like all naval personnel, was fully trained in small arms, Human weapons at least. It was for God knows what situation, whether that be to repel enemy boarders or to defend yourself on a hostile world like this.

He placed the weapon on the magnetic seal on his back, covered by a black naval combat dress uniform, standard. Two other people were in the armory while the others loaded up.

"You sure you can handle that weapon, sir?" One of the Spartan-IIIs said. He was dressed in blue MJOLNIR Power Assault Armor, with a spider-like visor tinted yellow. He towered above Mark, standing around six foot six

That was something Mark found odd. When Morganson said 'Spartans', Mark assumed it was the few Spartan-IVs that were aboard on the _Legend After _and listed on the crew manifest on their departure, as with every naval vessel with the Spartan-IVs' mass production. Believe it; he would've defiantly noticed if _Spartan-III_s, one of the many Spartan saviors of Humanity, were aboard his ship. And if he didn't notice, the crew would surely tell him sooner or later.

They were just there? No word from the crew, and when Mark quickly asked Morganson about it, she was just as surprised as he was. A ship on patrol, suddenly pulled out by ONI to investigate a Forerunner artifact, packed with _two _Spartan-IIIs, unnoticed by any personnel. That means they were either stowaways or ONI had agents on his ship to conceal them.

Both ideas were frightening. And the thoughts that Mark was crafting meant that ONI risked Humanity's security, they had to know which ship they were going to pick out for this missionâ€| So did that mean they knew about the artifact beforehand?

"Three-round burst, thirty-six rounds per mag, gas powered, seven-point-six kilograms in weight." The Spartan said as he grabbed a rifle and placed it over his shoulder. Mark noticed the tag on his collar read Tom-B292. "Am I right?"

Tom looked at the other Spartan, her plate showing the name, 'Lucy', who even by regular human standards was short standing at only five foot two, very unimpressive. She just shrugged under her green

armor.

"That sounds about right." Mark said. He guessed there was time to fear later. For the moment, from what he could tell, they followed his orders. Both saluted when he met them, both gathered weapons and nukes at his orders. True warriors that always disturbed Mark, unlike the rest of Humanity. "I'll assume one of you can fly a Pelican?"

"Sir, yes, sir. It's kinda a sixth sense to me." Tom said.

"Good. Lucy, you'll be backdoor gunner. Contradiction, how do the Pelicans look?" Mark looked to Contradiction as he took him out from his strapped pocket, a small avatar displaying on a holo-data chip. Almost billions of compressed files and data on a single piece of silicon.

"Good, sir. A little bent out of shape from the crash, but airworthy nonetheless." He said.

"And initiation of Cole Protocol?"

"Yes sir. All system files, UNSC data, operating systems, navigation, vids of pornographic nature, all of it, has been deleted. Triple reactors sealed up, slipspace drive deactivated, Shiva tactical nukes are hot and ready to blow on your command to send this ship to Hell." Contradiction smiled. "I also finally found a voice in the chaos. UNSC E-band frequency. Coming from a pod about eleven miles out, near that alien city."

He tapped on a screen, and a deep voice played. "This is Lieutenant Marcus Banks of the UNSC Legend After can anybody read me? We are being attacked by unknown hostile, I have multiple casualties and a critical wounded, our coordinates are zero, five, zero. We crash landed near a large, xeno city, can anyone respond?"

"That was three minutes ago. It's replaying on a loop." Contradiction said. "We're only getting input, I can't get a connection. But, they seem to be a couple miles out from the city."

"Are they hostiles from the squids or the other ship design?"

"Unknown at the moment, sir. They report that their weapons are surgically attached to their hands, dressed in black and red combat armor."

"Okay... get loaded and ready to rock and roll. They'll be our first stop."

The two began to walk out. Florence grabbed Lucy's shoulder pad before she could walk out, his hand freezing under the metal armor.

"Lucy, your armor is more compatible with data chips, and a lot safer than a pocket; I need you to hang on to Contradiction." Presenting her the chip, Contradiction disappeared. It only showed the small blue holographic circle.

No response. She took the chip and inserted it into the slot at the

back of her helmet.

"Oh, your armor is quiteâ€¦|_cozy_|." Contradiction said

Lucy's visor turned visible and Mark could see her brown eyes widen slightly at what Contradiction said.

"He's justâ€¦|joking, you know?" Mark said, awkwardly smiling at her.

Contradiction replied. "Right. Don't worry. I won't fuck around too much in hereâ€¦|"

"Shut it and get to the pelican. We'll sort out this thing, later." He said

Lucy nodded, and then ran out of the room leaving Mark alone. He turned to the rack filled with dozens upon dozens of weapons that will be turned to radioactive rubble in the next few minutes. He grabbed another gun, a M7/Caseless submachine gun, the same onyx black weapon the UNSC has been using since the Great War.

He wondered how long this crew will last. They shouldn't even be out here, his decision. He ensured the enforcement of Cole Protocol and the JAG codes, and so on to defend Humanity and hide the location of Earth. But he made the decision to move forward with zero forethought. And when they were about to blast from the God's Key, his mind finally took over after its urge on to. It just stoppedâ€¦|the whisper.

...

A sudden jump downwards that slightly lifted Mark in the confines of space in the strapped seat. The Pelican still moved forward, under heavy vibration that eventually subsided. The door was closed, for their own protection, with Lucy leaning against it with the M247H machine gun next to her. It was roomy. The D79H-TC Pelican variant maintained a larger cargo, thus holding far more personnel than older models. Morganson's shuttle followed closely behind Mark, carrying the rest of the sailors and wounded.

Mark stood up, maintaining balance as he began to pull out stretchers and medical equipment from the compartments above. He laid them down neatly, looking at Lucy.

"Nukes detonated. It'll be a few moments before we can see if anything survived, but the gravitational depressions sure are spread out and a lot smaller I can tell you that." Contradiction said from Lucy's helmet. "EMPâ€¦| passed, all systems functional and responding.

"What about fallout?"

"I've stalled it. It'll take a couple hours to spread, uh, about fifteen clicks. However, wind direction is running opposite, all our luck thank Christ. It will spread away from the xeno city and any other pods."

"Good work." Cole Protocol was fully enforced. For the moment, Humanity and the location of Earth were safe.

There was another moment of silence as Mark took out more equipment. Lucy just seemed like a mannequin leaning there and doing nothing. She didn't even seem to be breathing.

"Hey, Lucy. No offense, but uh, shouldn't you be taller? I mean, for a Spartan-III, you know?" Mark said to Lucy.

She only shrugged in response.

Alright. Cool.

Mark equipped standardized breathers and full gear the marines use in space engagement. From Contradiction's readings, the planet contained twenty-four percent oxygen and seventy-five percent nitrogen, very similar to Earth. It had gravitation slightly above that of Earth, at about one point two gravitations. But, it was a protocol precaution. They air could contain a number of diseases, or fungi, or whatever. It doesn't make sense however. How can a disease immediately spread to an unknown biological host without any previous contact without decades of evolution? Well, then again, there were other parasites that somehow jumped over this obstacle€|

"Cap, approaching crash site. One klick out. I got a full horn with Lieutenant Banks on the short-wave."

"Roger that. Get him on the horn. Tell Morganson to get a klick altitude orbit around the crash site."

"Copy."

Lucy pulled out the holo-chip, displaying the avatar as he opened up a screen and typing in the code for the E-Band frequency.

Lieutenant Banks' voice began playing. "-fucking Christ. Can anyone hear me!? I have multiple wounded and under heavy fire from unidentified hostiles. Someone, anyone, respond goddamn it!"

The lieutenant tried to remain calm, with heavy fire control in the background.

Captain Florence responded. "Lieutenant, this is Captain Mark Florence. We have Pelican transport inbound. How many survivors, hal copy?"

An explosion rung before the Lieutenant spoke. "Roger that, Captain. Thank God. I have two dead, and five injured. One of them is critical. Those red bastards are gaining ground. We need evac immediately, Captain!"

Mark told them they'll be on their way, turning to Tom in the cockpit to drop down and provide fire support. Lucy returned the holo-chip back into her helmet, securely for combat, sealing it up and shutting out the slightly pestering AI.

"Spartan, grab the gun, provide suppressive fire." Mark said.

She nodded, pulling out the M247H. She cocked the gun, making sure ammo was set and in place.

Mark hanged on with another experienced wave of gravitation as the Pelican decreased from subsonic speeds to less than twenty-five kph.

Mark hanged on as the Pelican's constant motion was interrupted violently. Explosions penetrated the metal sanctum with spread of light from the cockpit window. And soon enough, the cargo door opened to reveal the world of rolling hills and decimated grasses by craters and trenches. Lucy's weapons fell with the door, controlled by the Spartan as she started to open fire without hesitation upon the red figures below climbing above a rolling hill and surrounding a crashed pod that rolled against the other side of the hill, leaving skid marks against the grass. Small arms fire of red lasers exchanged with the yellow lights surrounding lead shells near the pod. The Pelican encircled the wreck, getting closer to the surface every passing second. Tom fired off missiles in support, leaving only fires, craters, and the dead bodies of squid soldiers.

The captain climbed forward, with the Pelican's nose dipped forcing him to crawl towards the door. He reached the opening, picking himself up with both weapons slung across his shoulder strapped onto a band, using both hands to grasp onto the leaning rail and looking out onto the battlefield.

The only reason at the moment the Captain assumed these bastards were squid was because of the color schemes. They were dark red and black, similar to the squids the engaged the Legend After. But, for all he knew it could be a completely different species.

From the looks of these ground squids, it seemed an abomination of morphed together armors covering a tortured and destroyed body that didn't seem alive. Beings below held what looked like surgically attached weapons firing lasers of red and black light. They held a multitude of eyes, each screaming against death and a large mouth opening only unto a blue abyss. Their bodies were humanoid, with a bloated stomach covered by a single metal covering looking similar to a pressurized seal. What supported them more or less were crawling sacks supported by bug-like legs held together by a harness firing off heavy laser rounds and leaving a deafening sound across the area. In the distance, the burning ruins of the city and the beginning formations of rain clouds raged against the rising sun.

The Pelican hovered over the earth a few feet now, straying a short distance away from the crash site as Lucy unloaded round after round. Squids fell one by one, and those crawling sacks burst, leaving only biological chunks and some type of liquid with something crawling out of it.

Mark jumped off the Pelican when it was a safe distance from the surface, unslinging his battle rifle and kneeled into the dirt to observe the situation. He then stayed low, moving forward and reaching the back of the crashed pod.

He read the situation. Only three men were abled body, two being marines and one being a sailor dressed in a yellow uniform signifying an engineer armed only with a Magnum. Both marines sat against a mound of dirt that connected to the edge of the pod, with one soldier firing off a SAW machine gun and the other providing fire discipline with a BR85HB SR Battle Rifle. Inside the pod, the bodies of the wounded blocked the floor, each given the standard morphine and

biofoam that filled their wounds as the engineer remained and guarded them. The dead were also with them, black bags zipped up to conceal.

"Lieutenant Banks!?" Mark yelled as he ran to their cover, jumping onto the dirt mound next to the marines. The one holding the SAW turned towards Mark, rolling over the other marine to yell face to face with the Captain. The other marine provided covering fire as the Pelican returned to the air to hold off the approaching squid in a circular holding pattern. Lasers of black flew by, some hitting the dirt mound and leaving specks flying.

The Lieutenant grabbed Mark by the shoulder pad, pulling him closer. "Captain, sir! Thanks for getting us the fuck out of here! Wounded are mobilized to go, but we got one bastard we can't move or else we'll kill him!"

"What's his injury!?"

"I don't fucking know, sir! The other wounded got injured during the crash, our trajectory was fucked! This guy got shot in the chest by one of their laser rounds; we had to get his armor off quick! The shit kept burning through, reached his chest and burnt one of his lungs open! The biofoam is the only thing keeping him in one piece at this moment! If we move him, the foam might become unstable and a lot of bad shit will happen!"

Mark nodded, activating his comm and getting a line to the Pelican. "Tom, get the Pelican back, we're moving the wounded! Get the cargo door as close to the pod as possible!"

Tom responded by breaking the Pelican from its orbit, motioning towards the pod as Lucy still provided covering fire.

Mark rose from his position, aiming down the scope of the rifle and pressing the trigger. The recoil bounced against his shoulder after the release of each triple shell cluster with lead powder and gas filling up his nose. He first targeted a big mouth, releasing shell after shell directly in its mouth leaving only a body that startlingly turned into ashes of red and dust. The rifle rubbed his shoulder raw, leaving an empty clip as the Pelican landed and shakily backed up towards the pod. The bursts of red lasers against the hull of the Pelican increased as it got closer and closer.

Lucy exited the Pelican, moving towards the other side to help fend off the squids with a MA5D. Mark entered the pod and grabbed the wounded by the armpits, dragging them onto the metal doors of the Pelican and deep within the hold. Banks and his men joined him. The stretchers and medical equipment wasn't needed, lying in cases and folded stretchers scattered across the floor in an unorganized mess. What was left in the pod was the wounded marine, a corroding body with part of it made of foam. A face of death entrenched in every boundary of physical feature, yet the embodiment of air expanded and continued the respiration cycle, using the foam as biological substitute. The green armor laid next to him, blood and blackened holes painted throughout the metal exterior

"Alright, grab a stretcher, we have no choice." Mark ordered.

Both marines grabbed a stretcher, pulling it from the Pelican. The

engineer joined them, and soon enough all four of them surrounded the one.

"Captain, you might want to hurry up." Tom said through the comms.
"Hull is cracking up."

"Gently raise his body up on three so we can move him to the stretcher." Mark said. He reached down and grabbed his right shoulder, along with everyone else who grabbed an end. The engineer held the stretcher ready next to the body.

"Three.

"Two.

"One."

Mark used his strength and lifted the body, all of them quickly and unfortunately roughly placed the body on the stretcher. Luckily, from quick observation, no major damage was inflicted. The marines and the engineer carried him to the scarred Pelican.

"Lucy, let's go. WE ARE LEAVING!" Mark ordered, jumping onto the Pelican and grabbing the machine gun's stick.

The Pelican twisted, causing its four engines to turn towards different directions. Lucy turned from engaging the enemy and ran towards the lifting Pelican. She jumped on, grasping the edge of the opened cargo doors and quickly lifted herself up without any assistance.

The Pelican gained altitude, leaving a strengthened force that tried in futile effort to bring down the Pelican. Mark offered the gun to Lucy as he returned to the former position, hanging onto the lean rail.

Christ. Another encounter. More info to file with FLEETCOM.

Before he turned to check on the wounded and the others, something emerged from the rolling hill. A being the size of a Hunter and containing rage of its equivalence. It held a spine structure with skeleton horns breaching its back and leaving holes within the skin. An overextended claw connected by black tubes encompassed what should've been the left hand, and the only thing that connected the body to its head was three pipes shaped like flexible metal tubing. No lower jaw as far as Mark could see, with two specks of white light enacting as eyes. Dark, ugly purple armor giving the monster size, covering the midsection. This similar armor scheme, jagged and bulky, went along with the creature's shoulders and leg coverings. The legs themselves looked in no way they could support it, and what should've been skin was pure red muscle.

This monster sprinted across the battlefield towards the Pelican at incredible speeds, gaining enough velocity and jumping towards the ship.

It grabbed the Pelican door, straining the connection and drifting the entire Pelican off course. The thing tried to lift its claw toward the door, hampered when Mark pulled out his M7 and tore away

the flesh and other entities of the hands with every shell. Lucy abandoned her post, pulling a grenade from her belt and throwing it towards the bastard.

Ever so close was the claw when the explosion replaced the face and body of the creature, leaving it to fall and crash into the grass. But it still lived, quickly regaining footing and chased after the Pelican in vain. The transport lifted back to original position in the air, traveling faster and faster with cargo doors closing for safety.

"Welcome to Vietnam, Captain!" Contradiction said through the comm link as Mark fell to the floor with a slowing heart.

****Aboard UT-47 Kodiak Drop Shuttle, 9,000- kilometers within Illium orbit, 2186 Citadel Calendar, 09:25****

The dropship made its way toward Illium, passing by countless battles between individual ships unnoticed. Shepard stayed within the cockpit, hanging on to the rails as Cortez maneuvered the shuttle with the orange flight control. The ship rocked against the inertia dampeners as they were pulled by the planet's gravitational influence.

"Shepard, I've got Reaper signatures surrounding the ships." Cortez said. He displayed a monitor on the control panel from the shuttle's scope. The hulking ship entrenched within the scarred rolling hills that surrounded Nos Astra. Four Reaper destroyers, pathetic compared to the monster, climbed around the ship, using their magnetohydrodynamic cannon as a drill to cut through the armor of the ship. The destroyers began cutting through the ship's hull name, gashing across the UNSC word.

It looked like they were having trouble however. With a Dreadnaught, or any other ship for that matter, it would've only taken less than a few seconds to cut through the hull. But the destroyer was still cutting through. In a few moments later, as if calling for help, a Reaper capital ship landed near the ship, ground shaking under its tendrils.

It stood up from the kinetic impact, readying its spinal cannon

"Damn it, they'll be eaten alive down there." Shepard half-yelled. "How long?"

"A few more minutes. I have to maneuver around detection from the Reaper AA defense network. Either way, the drop zone is too hot. I can land you a couple kilometers outâ€¦Wait, wait, wait, standby. I'm picking up dozens of concentrated radiation signatures, gamma. Sudden pre-dispersion, oh shit!"

Cortez hard-banked left (at least left within Shepard's mind's frame of direction) from the intended drop zone on the planet. Before the monitor shut off, there was a brilliant flash of white light that completely engulfed the Legend After and the Reapers. The shockwave reached the ship, overriding any inertia dampeners and vibrating every metal component of the ship.

The shuttle lights flickered off and on, and there was a massive jump

near the left side of the ship. The first feeling was in Shepard's stomach, a feeling of falling.

"Shit! EMP! Eezo electrical current is surging out, mass effect field is increasing!" Cortez yelled. "We're going in like a rock, the engines are just for control. I'll try to stabilize the current. Hang on. ETA till atmosphere: fi-"

Everything that wasn't bolted down immediately began to float in the empty spaces of the shuttle. Shepard turned back to Liara and Tali in the cargo hold. Both jolted in the air as they held on to the ceiling handles.

There was a violent jump, flinging Shepard towards the ceiling like a ragdoll. Shoulder first. His armor protected against most of the impact, rolling back and immediately hitting his back onto the floor.

He didn't know where Liara and Tali were at. Cortez was still trying to manage the shuttle, orange lights fading away. Liara's foot accidental hit Shepard in the face. A brief flash of blood from his nose and a quick loss of consciousness.

The next thing Shepard knew, they were floating within the cargo hold again, reaching higher and higher towards the ceiling.

"Brace for impact!" Cortez yelled

Another hard crash, Shepard flying straight towards the deck and meeting the grey tiles body first. It was worse than being hit in the stomach by a Krogan. He got the wind knocked out of him, panicked as he tried to breath. There was an incline, a rolling hill probably, throwing Shepard one last time. He slid towards the cockpit, sliding back down towards a tear in the ship's cargo hold.

The cargo hold barely held in one piece, small areas giving way to the green grass of the planet. The cargo hold had holes all over the metal paddings, a large gash across the left door that revealed a huge chunk of the outside world. Supplies littered the floor, along with chunks of metal and misplaced seats. The windows were shattered, heavy duty plastics in crumbly pieces.

Blood was smeared across his mouth. Shoulder and stomach stinging. His back was sore and felt sort of funny. Other than that however, the armor took most of the impact. But he felt the combat mold, specifically to his body type, loosen its grip and the armor parts beginning to sag. It felt extremely heavy, unbearable and almost crushing his shoulders. The Omni-computer within his left hand began to sting slightly, like a bug bite.

He stumbled a little. It became harder to move. Probably from a combination of the recent crash and armor.

Liara looked okay, thank God. She was leaning against the right wall, shaking as she stood up and using both arms on the railing, one covering the other. Tali was upside down, against the opposite wall. She readjusted herself, hitting her side against the floor.

"Keelah, that's the third worst landing I've ever been in." Tali said. She had her hand on her visor as Liara was helping her up. "Uh,

I think I'm going to vomit."

"Sorryâ€|ah, the shuttle was a rock with control. I tried to do the gentlest landing arc I could, but wellâ€|voltage surge caused an increased mass effect field. The ship couldn't take itâ€|." Cortez began. There was blood dripping from the corner of his mouth. His legs were still under the control panel. It was collapsed, covering his legs.

"Christ. Let's get Cortez out of there." Shepard said.

Liara tried to apply medi-gel, only to find an Omni-tool that jittered and flickered on her arm. It died, leaving an electric burst. Shepard and Tali pulled out Cortez, panel falling apart under empty spacing. Cortez screamed out, gripping his leg. Shepard saw something jut out under his outer leg pads.

They laid him on the uneven floor. Liara kneeling next to him. She gently placed pressure on Cortez's chest, causing a wave of agony for him as he pushed her away and breathed in and out in a panic. Hands gripping his cloths and clenching them.

"Broken ribs. He must have hit his chest on the panel during the crash." Liara said.

"Yeah. Again, sorry about the terrible landing." He said through the pain

"You did well. We're alive, and, well, we made it to Illium." Shepard said. "What the hell kind of bomb was that?"

"Nuclear bomb. Nuclear explosion. Defiantly nuclear. Electromagnetic radiation on this scale could only be produced by such a weapon." Tali said. "That had to be a yield of a couple hundred megatons at least. On a garden world like this, the fallout could be catastrophic."

"By the Goddess, the barbarians," Liara said, getting back on her feet, "They had to know the effects of a WMD on a garden world. The Citadel Conventions banned its use for good reason."

"What the hell," Shepard began. The aliens just broke one of the most sacred laws of galactic warfare (as regulated by the Citadel). The prohibition of use of nuclear weapons on a habitable garden world. With so few in the galaxy, it would take decades for the world to fully recovery. Sure, Earth has withstood multiple uses of the atomic bomb, but nothing near the yield of modern weapons. He was unsure whether to forgive them in their ignorance and lack of foresight or compliment them on their efficiency.

"We'll make sure these people know what atrocity they committed. But for now, we have to worry about the fallout zone. And the city." Shepard said.

"Noâ€|" Cortez stopped for a brief moment, grunting in pain as he grabbed his leg. "I tried to navigate outside the possible fallout zone. We'reâ€|on the other side of the city, about fifty-one miles away from the crash site."

"Good job, Cortez. Really saved us there." Shepard said.

"As for the city, the fallout will most defiantly affect people within. How long it will take and its affects to set in depends on the bomb's radiation yield. And if it were thermonuclear, we'd already be dead." Liara said, always the optimist.

Shepard looked to Tali. "Noted. Tali, can you get our communications back up? We have to contact the _Normandy _or anybody and warn them."

"The EMP surged up the electrical current holding the Eezo together. I can't fix it without proper tools. Hang on, the current was disrupted. If I can just find two conductors and a origin point, so to establish a commlink." There was a spark of electricity. Tali grabbed her hand and held it to her body. "Bosh'tet. There. That should do it."

Before Shepard could even speak through his link, Joker burst through word after word. "-canâ€|oh, oh, thank God, Commander. We've been trying to contact you all day."

"Joker! Good to hear your voice. The explosion sent an EMP, crashed our shuttle on the other side of the city. Cortez is hurt bad. Most of our electronics, including armor and weapons, are down. Can you get James to fly down with the spare shuttle for casevac and resupply?"

Joker didn't even seem to acknowledge the Commander. "Sir, something _huge _just came out of Relay. Itâ€|Holy mother of... The thing just rammed into a Reaper! It literally rammed the Reaper! It literally went right through a Reaper! The thing is in shreds! Holyâ€|Iâ€|

"Joker? What the hell are you talking about?"

"Jesus, how the hell can it...?" For a moment, there was no more chatter. Then EDI's voice came online.

"Shepard? Joker's having a small panic attack and I can't blame him. Ten new contacts came out of the Relay. They're unlike any of the architecture structure of the original three ships." After the brief meeting with Admiral Hackett, both Liara and Tali tasked EDI to carry out analysis and cross-analysis on pretty much everything known on the new contacts. "Joker is wrong, these ships aren't huge they are _massive_. Larger than the _Legend After_, _Dreadnaught_, _Destiny Ascension_ or any Reaper ship known in the galaxy."

Hearing the size of ships effecting EDI so much whereas she spoke more human frightened Shepard. Nothing can be larger than the _Destiny Ascension._

"They attracted the attention of almost every Reaper in the solar system. They'reâ€| as Joker would bluntly say "swatting them like flies". However they are tremendously halted on their trajectory towards Nos Astra. I don't know for how long. As for resupply and casevac, the _Normandy _can't get a trajectory with those ships in the way-" _How big were they?! _"- without risking hitting them or having contradicting trajectories, and I have to stay to monitor and gather any information I can, as requested by Doctor T'Soni-"

"EDI, belay that order--"

"Fine. But that doesn't change anything, Shepard. From my calculated trajectory, those ships are on a direct course to Nos Astra, directly into the Reaper AA network. I can launch the shuttle, but it doesn't have the stealth capabilities to get by those defenses. And either way, there's no telling what those ships are capable of. I'm contacting nearby local Alliance assets. Cruiser SSV _Cairo_ is currently readjusting trajectory that is perpendicular to your position. I can have them high-orbit strike-drop ground transport and repair supplies before those ships get there."

"Alright. Do what you can" Ground transportation. Shepard already had a feeling which vehicle the _Cairo_ was going to drop off. "What about the _Legend After_? Were there any survivors in the explosion? Will the fallout reach us or the city?"

"Negative, Commander. I was keeping a tight watch of the ship. Before the explosion, two shuttles exited the ship and headed eastwards towards the city at subsonic speeds. I was going to contact you, but the EMP happened. The fallout zone is also contradicting my current data. The radiation is to less than sixteen kilometers in diameter and blowing away from the city due to wind currents, but it is lethal enough to kill someone within a few seconds. They must've contained it somehow."

That was a relief. Not only for Shepard's squad, but for the city, and Illium itself, possibly. Maybe these aliens weren't as brutal as Shepard first wanted to perceive after these events. They had some insight, maybe sympathy and care towards other species.

"Good. I'll have Tali on the line with the supply list. We'll wait for the shuttle."

â€

The memories came flooding back. The M-35 Mako bouncing at every small rock and hill like a beach ball. Inertia dampeners barely holding off the outside forces as Shepard tried to maintain a straight path. The sound of the engines at first surprising the Commander then quickly becoming white noise just like under the days of the SR-1. Trenches, craters. Hell, eighty-nine degree hills were no match for the LAV. The thing survived an orbital drop nearly twenty kilometers above from a cruiser traveling at supersonic speeds.

Shepard tried his best to maintain a smooth course, which was almost impossible in this thing. Tali did her best to reconfigure direct energy currents and stabilize electrical currents on electronics. Liara tried to tend to Cortez, a bit better than five minutes ago and quiet under sedative treatment.

Shepard twisted the bulky handles, something almost identical to the steering wheel of the transport car in that old, corny movie _Aliens_ that Shepard used to watch as a kid. Added on was the head-twist system, the main gun turning wherever Shepard turns his head towards any camera displaying all sides of the Mako.

The clouds formed quickly, completely blocking out the sun and connecting to the formed mushroom cloud where the _Legend After_ once

was. The rain remained constant, a few droplets that formed into a majestic curtain of mist in the distance. Hopefully the rain wasn't acidic.

No Reapers in sight. It was possible they were deployed to the _Legend After_'s position to secure whatever was left or to set up counter defenses in preparation of the ten alien ships.

Soon enough, Tali and Liara joined him, Tali using a now stabilized Omni-tool to reset the other currents.

"Never thought the mission would go like this." Shepard said.

"Yeah, says the one who won't be sick for a month, and I'm not sure whether it's from exposure, the crash, or this bouncy ball known as a tank." Tali said, filled with mockery and spite.

"How are you doing speaking of which?"

"Hot. It is very hot, Commander. The suits mechanical systems took effect when electronic completely failed. I only had a few minutes of exposure. But this thing is locked tight, and there's no air-conditioning, at all."

"Well, it could be worse, right?"

Tali didn't respond for a moment, causing Shepard to quickly turn around for a moment and see two patronizing white lights. They turned back to their Omni-tool. "Nukes. A couple hundred megatons is nothing compared to the damage dealt with modern kinetic weapons. But why use such a weapon with their advance technology? Not only that, but on a garden world?

"As much as I hate to admit it," Shepard said, turning back to the controls, "it was effective, unfortunately. However I wonder if they think it was worth it. There's a war, but there's also a future to think about"

Another set of rolling hills. The city seemingly keeping a constant distance despite the closing gap.

"The aliens?" Liara said. "Undeniably, it was effective, or the Reapers survived off screen and we don't know it. The Citadel ban went out the window when the Reapers came; we've just never used them because we didn't think they would be this effective. Within exosphere, the bomb's intensity is heavily decreased but not the radiation or EMP scale" Liara trailed off, looking through the cameras at the mushroom cloud. "The aliens seem less morally obligated, or at least they view WMD use far differently than we do to justify themselves besides efficiency. Tali is correct. Their main cannon's kinetic velocity would surely upset and render the nuclear bombs useless in space, even on the ground. Unless they use them for some special type of purpose that is beyond me. If they had to use it against another type of ship, others like theirs say"

"Speaking of which, now we have ten larger ships. EDI didn't say how large, but we can assume something sane" as sane with a ship larger than _Destiny Ascension_."

"What's your point?" Shepard said, looking ahead towards the finite

plains transforming to the blue waves of the sea. Over those waters raged Reaper ships engaged by fighter and interceptor squadrons.

"Well, let's say our hype is correct. Thisâ€¦UNSC has already demonstrated they possess a handful of powerful frigates. Let's say they had even moreâ€¦ One-hundred, let's say, some even larger and more powerful, at the least-

"At the least?" Tali interrupted, turning towards Liara. "You're not suggesting they've built larger and more powerful ships than the _Legend After_? Andâ€¦whatever might be those ships up above? It's ridiculous enough and _insane_ as it already is. At this point, you have to take into consideration stuff like the square-cube law. They have to have found some material, maybe altered titanium or layered graphene that still kept the carbon in its two-dimensional shape. They had to find something stronger than Reaper foundational structure in order to maintain a ship larger than two kilometers. Orâ€¦uhâ€¦" She stopped for a moment, leaning against her hands and breathing in. "It's like a sauna in here. Uhâ€¦anyways, zero gee force would basically be holding the ship at this point. It'd be fun seeing aâ€¦seven kilometer say, or even a five kilometer ship perform a hard gee maneuver."

She began to laugh to herself. More funny to her than the other two. But it stopped.

The first thing was a sudden feeling of lightness. The Mako became a lot harder to control than it already was to, veering off course and pulled backwards like it was being sucked into something. Slight yet constant vibration. Then there was a large burst of sound, a decrescendo of something similar to an explosion. It sounded like it was right next to Shepard, nearly deafening him and losing focus.

The grey light blackened and leaving the surface barely visible. Something passed overhead. A wave of purple lights on a curved, elegant purple metal, connecting seamlessly into one piece. A sudden depression into a thinning connector displaying rough insides, like the surface of a computer chip. Stretching into an oval shape, with randomized, symmetrical sets of elegant covering and rough sections surrounding patterns of blue and purple light with a pink circle in the center of the oval. What followed were a set of bright blue engines followed by a tail piece.

Beforehand, Liara set the Mako to pick up FM broadcasts just in case the aliens sent out radio waves. A voice played, deep and commanding.

"Hail Humans, and take heed! This is Shipmaster Rtas 'Vadum of the _Shadow of Intent_. Stand by as we clear these abominations. We shall deploy troops to your coordinates' momentarily. Prepare for evacuation!"

****Aboard UNSC **_**Infinity**_**

****200,000 kilometers over Earth****

****2557 Military Calendar, 09:52****

Lasky wasn't unfamiliar to the seat of command on the *_Infinity_*, having a few weeks prior before the battle over Earth and the Master Chief's rearrival. It was just official now, named as the true captain. The crew knew him well, but still. It was crushing to command one of Humanity's greatest achievement along with fifty-eight of the most advanced warships the UNSC has to offer.

What didn't help was the time frame. He could see the look of disappointment of the bridge crews' faces when Lasky told them they had to redeploy. Marines, Spartans, ODSTs, and other personnel called back immediately from all over the globe. He tried switching out personnel under echelon rank three, but there wasn't enough time to switch out everyone, and it wouldn't be fair to the others. So Lasky filled in any gaps left from Requiem with fresh troops.

Christ. He didn't even have time to pick out an executive officer. Commander Sarah Palmer will suffice for the moment, but he needed an experienced naval officer, not a ground soldier.

"Calculations set to the God's Key. Battle Group Dakota will take about two hours to reach the location. We received the *_To the Right's_* AI mathematical report on locations. We're still trying to have a set distance differential calculation, but wherever they were sent is far out of Orion's Arm. The reports indicate the God's Key transportation system is near instantaneous, even faster than the *_Infinity_'s_* slipspace drive. It's the best option, Captain, though admittedly dangerous." Roland reported. Displayed on the massive holo-table of the *_Infinity_* bridge.

He was the *_Infinity_'s_* new AI. Fourth generation, brand new off the line. He had a yellow avatar, a bulky body dressed in a World War II bomber uniform. Lasky and the little guy got to know each other. He was alright, if not slightly annoying at times, but nothing too bad.

Lasky thanked the AI, turning from the table and looking out the bridge viewing glass. Stars all spread before them.

The bridge saw its purpose fulfilled, crew members handpicked out of the elite veterans only, reported to their stations. All stations reported green and combat ready, sectors and divisional operations were set and communications is charged back to HIGHCOM. The flight deck cramped with dozens of Broadwords, Shortwords, Longwords, a multitude of drone types, Pelicans, Heavy lift pods, Albatrosses, Falcons, Hornets, Hawks, Vultures, and ten *_Strident_-*class heavy frigates. For ground armaments, fifteen redeployable firebases, Warthogs, Scorpion tanks, Elephants, Mammoths, Cobras, Cyclops, Mantises, Wolverines, Rhinos, Mongooses, and Gremlins. There were also specialized slipspace beacons aboard, ready for deployment to create connections between the outlying fleet and the HIGHCOM board itself residing back on Earth. These were built for long-range communications, but it had never been tested at this distance. Hopefully, it'll work and the fleet won't need to constantly a report ship send in and out.

Six-thousand twenty-one marines already supplied by the *_Infinity_*, plus another fifteen-thousand aboard the other ships; five-thousand ODSTs cramped in the *_Infinity_'s_* drop bay, and two army divisions made up of about two million soldiers under Admiral Alvares, stored within her ships.

This formed up the entire group about to head into the breach. Longswords scouted the slipspace route ahead. Admiral Alvares and her Ninth Fleet lagged behind, consisting of about one-hundred-twenty ships, mostly made of older variants such as the _Marathon_-class cruiser headed by a _Valiant_-class super-heavy cruiser holding the admiral herself.

Because of the dispersal of few Forerunner applied technologies to the newer Battle Group Dakota, the fleets of the UNSC still relied on the technologies of the Great War, applying and adding newer ships as fast as the factories can make them until older variants are no longer needed of service. Very soon, HIGHCOM hoped the _Marathon_ cruiser, along with many other older ships including the _Valiant_-class will be replaced by the superiorities Battle Group Dakota held. Yet that day wasn't there yet, with the inferior fleet assigned to guard the other end of the God's Key while Lasky took to planetary engagement.

"Admiral, this is Captain Lasky. Our boards are green and we are prepped for launch. Hal copy?"

"Rodger that, Captain. Fleet is prepped. You'll be the vanguard, Lasky. Push through and complete the objective to draw their fire while we set up on the other side. Rules of engagement are clear: All squid targets are to be eliminated with extreme prejudice, leave out the other race. No contact until Lord Hood arrives."

"_Infinity_ copies. We'll push on through, Admiral." With that, Lasky cut the line.

Turning to the crew members and operators of the great ship, all noticed and halted to give him the deserved attention. "Alright, ladies! Board is green and we're good to go. Prep all shields and lock everything down. I want engines raised to point zero, zero one percent light speed, velocity decreased once we near the God's Key to optimal levels. Once more unto the breach!"

"Aye, aye, Captain!" The crew yelled in response, ranging from weapon technicians, mathematicians, astrophysicists, astro-navigators, electrical technicians, to radio operators, sprinting from station to station making last minute preparations.

The room turned into a red glow, a small and constant beeping of the jump alarm rang throughout the ship. Lasky's lungs constricted and breathing becoming ever harder with the engines pushing forward.

It'll take two hours to clear the system, relative to Earth at least. Thirty minutes for Lasky and the crew, the longest part of the journey. From there, Roland will take care of the slipspace jump along with the astrophysicists, and relativity will no longer become a factor. Before they jump system however, Lasky needed to speak with the Chief.

4. The moment of peace

Aboard UNSC **_Infinity**_

****Three million kilometers and closing from Mars****

****2557 Military Calendar, 09:56****

The _Infinity_ was moving out, preparing for slipspace jump to the Halo Ring. In the purposely emptied hallway, most of the crew knowing the secret and leaving it be after the tremendous hurt, was no longer an option as sailors made ready. Marines passed by in rows, dressed in civilian wear from a shortly cut vacation and heading towards the nearest armory to suit up, pretending not to look at him. The gaze of the Earth and its defenses slowly faded, replaced by the black of the void paraded with the stars of distant solar systems. Hundreds of kilometers away, Battle Group Dakota displayed rays of signal and display lights showing the ships' names.

Alone, the Master Chief watched those ships fly along with increasing ribbons of blue light with increased engine output. John could feel the _Infinity_'s force, metals vibrating, lungs forcing to expand. Gaining acceleration from momentum as engine output remained constant. He felt heavier. Relativity taking slight effect as the ship increased to under one percent the speed of light.

"Chief?" A familiar voice said, causing the Spartan to turn around to meet Captain Lasky again. He leaned on the adjacent door to the thin hallway, arms crossed.

"How are you doing?" He said, empathetic.

No answer again. It was always odd to see him only dressed in the Spartan causal uniform the IVs always wore out of combat. It was sad almost. Lasky stayed where he was, leaning on the door.

"As you can tell, we're moving out. Ah, hopefully they have a couple decent bars for the leathernecks before they go crazy."

The Chief only processed the information. Another world like the dozens of others he deployed on. Nothing really different, even with First Contact.

"Personally, uh, I didn't want you to go. In my opinion, you deserve some rest." Then again, the entire crew does.

The Chief lingered on the words of Cortana. How she constantly raged how they used her, used him. The motions of depression never understanding and never realizing the potential of true human stimuli. Those sudden swings with the development of something highly unnatural to her processors, and self-loathing for being a "copy" of Doctor Halsey.

"But, if you want to go, then I'll let you. If you don't, then you can stay on the ship and let the other Spartans take care of the operation." Lasky said. "A lot of people will call me tactically stupid, but we have enough Spartan-IVs to take a planet. Either way, I believe we should hold some of our cards just in case the enemy pulls something. If we really need you, then these alien bastards are a lot more powerful than mankind."

I'm not doing this for mankind.

Yet he did do it for them. All of it. He did his duty, while

sheâ€|strained away. Over those years, numbness towards the lives of others. Yetâ€|she tried to pull him away in the endâ€|andâ€|

Lasky smiled in sympathy, walking over to the Chief for a brief moment, placing a hand on his shoulder and tried his best to give him a hopeful smile. He had to extend his arm all the way, quickly placing it back after a moment.

"I originally came down here to tell you what Lord Hood told me to tell you. We found-"

"Captain." The Master Chief said, turning towards Lasky

"Yeahâ€|John?" Lasky said, turning around before he trended any further.

"I'll go." He simple said.

Lasky remained silent, slightly confused. "What do you mean-?"

"I'll deploy with the first wave on the garden world and retrieve any UNSC survivors. If this hostile contact is more powerful than we thought, then you'll need me on the ground immediately."

Lasky didn't say anything for a moment, stepping back. "Chief, are you sure-"

"I'll go."

"Look-"

"I'll go." John said, leaving a momentary silence with no response from Lasky

Lasky looked odd for a moment, something that turned those brown eyes into worry and another mixture of emotions beyond him. The Chief never mastered controlling his voice for reason of sociality. He wondered what he sounded like then. Angry? Determined? Lasky sighed, maybe realizing the Chief's intentions, unable to say maybe out of fear of what he'll do, realization, or possibly out of too much kindness. He rubbed his face with one hand, leaning back on the glass wall.

"Maybe you should hear something, first." Lasky said.

"I understand, Captain, but I have to suit and gear up." And that was more or less true. They only had minutes, and Spartan gear took at least fifteen minutes to place under pressure.

He turned from Lasky, heading down the hall towards the armories.

"Chief." Lasky said, sullen yet removing himself from the usual self into the bounds of depression. "As a friend, I ask you to hear what I have to say."

The Chief didn't say anything, continuing on, moving past Lasky.

"Hey!" Lasky, going into the tone of a commander. "I _refuse _to order you for something like this, but you will listen to what I have to say."

For a moment, the Spartan looked back. Seeing the distraught of his face, unable to cope with the harshness to command.

The Master Chief turned back. Silent.

Lasky sighed, rubbing his face before he spoke. "Christâ€¦ Scavenger teams found something in the ruins. Computer terminals, data cores, multiple Forerunner data cores. When Cortana inserted herself in the Forerunner ship, it distributed her function data like a normal, more modern AI aboard a UNSC ship."

Less than a second the Chief realized what Captain Lasky was getting at. The Chief stepped forward. "Captainâ€¦ are you sayingâ€¦?"

"The data is incomplete. Large gaps in coding that would take decades to fill. It's unable to process or run without complete erroneous readings leading to force shut downs or over misinterpretation of data which ends up inâ€¦ what the eggheads call 'endless sequence loops'.

"Yeahâ€¦ as you can tell, they've already been experimenting."

"She'sâ€¦ alive?" The Chief only said.

"â€¦ Chief, Lord Hood debated telling you so early, butâ€¦ to him, the situation required it. You understand the Cortana was going through rampancy, her memory processors are on level with a human brain, if not larger. At our current technological level, her core would need to be as large as Earth. And it would only get bigger with her aging, developing more feedback systems and memory. Because of this, she was forced to initiate a complete data dump and erase. She would've completed it, save for you blowing up the Didact's ship and cutting out the connection system. If we make repairs, we have no idea what would happen, besides some of the eggheads theorizing 'metastability'. But constant, repeating feedback loops created multiple personalities in order to continue these adding loops.

"She was trying to solve these loops, answering almost paradox questions, her existence as a whole."

"You said you're experimenting with whatever data is left. You can repair her?" The Chief said.

Lasky shook his head, like the Chief didn't understand something.

The Captain spoke. "Lord Hood is assigning all necessary assets available."

"Doctor Halseyâ€¦ what about Halsey? Have you told Halsey of your plan?"

"Uhâ€¦ Halsey is under Osman's jurisdiction. Prison. And I can't say I disagree with Osman, especially for what Halsey did. Ms. Naval Intelligence would be furious if I attempted to spring Halsey for

this, and either way it's all up to Lord Hood. It's hard to even get five minutes with her. I wouldn't know what the eggheads would do with her, whether have her brain scanned again to fill in the massive coding gaps or to actually tediously repair and recode."

Halsey kidnapped Spartans, who wouldn't want her locked up?

He was ambivalent with his feelings over the Doctor. She had kidnapped Kelly, left them alone during Operation First Strike. Her actions may have led to the deaths of Grace, Anton, Li, Polaski, Haverson, Admiral Whitcomb... Far too many people could have been saved if Halsey didn't do what she did.

However, Halsey gave him a purpose, a duty, his armor, his life, his Spartans ... Cortana. She took care of him, made sure he was happy with his future. Her actions saved the human race, saved him personally more than once. No matter what she did to them, no matter what crimes she committed, Dr. Halsey would always hold a special place in his heart. For Cortana if there was nothing else at least.

"Chief, I'll do whatever is within my power," Lasky said, "but I need you to understand that we have no idea what Cortana will be. Cortana might be completely different, she might be the same during rampancy, we might not even be able _to bring her back_.

"No, you canâ€| Doctor Halsey has the power-"

"â€|Chief-"

"Lord Hood will make Osman release her-"

"Okayâ€|" Lasky said, calm without any hint of anger but with a slightly raised voice.

There was a momentary alarm, followed by Roland's voice. Battle Group Dakota has entered Jupiter's gravitational influence, and readjusting trajectory to balance out the alternating force, calling for the Captain on the bridge

"Christâ€|" Lasky said, slightly rocking back and forth. "Chief, beyond that there's honestly nothing more I know, only what they placed in the reports. Believe me, I hope to God that we can bring Cortana back. But Humanity's always firstâ€|alwaysâ€|

"What do you want to do?" He seemed doubtful.

The Chief didn't hesitate, determined than ever. She'll be there, soonâ€| "My dutyâ€|is too Humanity."

Lasky nodded, slowly, moving away from the glass and back towards the hall door. "Yeah. Alright. Get to Spartan Command. Suit up. Prepare for possible orbital drop. Jared Miller will be filling in as tactical overseer."

Without any other word, the Chief turned down the hallway. Just in time, another group of marines passed by dressed in combat uniforms as a staff sergeant lead them, saluting the Captain as they went by

"Chief?" Lasky said.

The Master Chief turned around one last time.

"Come back alive, as a friend to a friend."

The Chief spoke, leaving Lasky silent.

He then continued down the hall. To protect and defend Earth and all her colonies.

The Captain stood there for another moment, turned almost all thoughts to the seat of command and headed towards the bridge.

â€|

Another day, another drop. Any day seems like a good day for a drop.

Jesus. Five years since that shitstorm of a deployment. Four years since that stunt of Draco III that almost got everyone in his squad killed. Promotion after promotion for him and his squad after that, with constant pestering from the Spartan-IVs to join their damn program. Finally, somehow Edward Buck made it as a commanding officer, a colonel, assigned to the five-thousand men of the 19th ODST Been.

They've been on a few deployments here and there, mostly to uppercut whatever was left of those traitors who call themselves 'rebels', and a few tours on the outer worlds to eliminate whatever was left of the fragile Covenant.

Still though, he did miss being out on the field. But still... he didn't do it alone. Immediately, when he assumed the position of one of the UNSC's top ODST groups he pulled the strings to get his old squad back. He assigned his executive officer as Major Cortez, an experienced soldier who partook on an assassination mission with Dutch, and as shown an extensive and prestigious track record within the UNSC. Cortez also pulled out a few of his guys to the Been. O'Brien, Walpole, and Jones. Buck pulled in Mickey, Dutch, the Rookie, and hell, even Romeo.

Aboard the UNSC Infinity, there was only a handful of ODSTs already on the ship, less than a full battalion. Colonel Buck's command was joined by none other than Major Marcus P. Stacker and his executive officer, First Lieutenant Chip Dubbo. They both served with the Chief during the end of the War, involved with the defense of New Mombasa and the highly classified final step to end the War. Everyday heroes.

They were also involved with the Requiem events. The only thing Buck knew about that was it kicked the hell out of the UNSCDF, and as they fought the 19th Been were deployed on some routine drill exercise in low troposphere over Estonia. The 19th Been now get to do something that seems a little exciting. On zero notice, Colonel Buck's Been was pulled from its station aboard the UNSC Dragonborn under a highly vague report sent from the spooks.

First Contact. Humanity's security. Unidentified, so on, and so

on...blah, blah, blah.

Crews, marines, naval personnel, other ODSs, all saluted the Colonel as he passed by.

"So, _sir_, you meet that Commander Palmer? She ain't too bad, even if she is about a foot taller than me." Romeo said, completely taking Buck by surprise as he ambushed him from a perpendicular hall.

Buck sighed. "No I have _not_, Lieutenant. Frankly I've been busy prepping for our deployment. But don't worry, we're dropping with the Spartan-IVs."

"Oh, great. I just love the fake freaks." Romeo said. Always the contradicting type.

Speaking of which, Commander Palmer made her way past the two, wearing white and red and black underlays uniform. Buck and her made a gesture of respect by both saluting each other as they pass. There was a figure following her, towering over her past seven feet. He wore dark olive green armor and a dark orange visor. The armor was a lot bulkier than Palmer's, giving him size with three slash marks entrenched in his chest plate traveling in a downwards motion.

They past them by pretty quickly, heading from the Spartan CIC.

"Damnâ€|huh, the UNSC just makes the Spartans better and better." Romeo said. He turned around and looked at the two. "Oh, I can watch her walk away all day."

"It's cause you're used to it. Either way, Lieutenant, Palmer wasn't the one I was staring atâ€|"

"What? Ever since you got the wedding band, other girls are completely off-limits?"

"Lord. Did you guys see that?" Lieutenant Dutch Miles interrupted, intercepting them from another hallway intersection.

He was already dressed in the black ODS battle armor, shouldering a Spartan Laser he got from God knows where.

"Yeah. Overhyped, drugged-up super soldiers. One of them a strong eight, maybe nine out of ten. So what?" Romeo replied, always in a pessimistic and spiteful tone.

"That wasn't any Spartan, that was the Master Chief."

Finally, Romeo got the message through his thick skull. "Woah, woah, woah. You mean like _the_ Master Chief? Sierra-117? I thought he got fucked."

"So did I, but he had the same kind of armor markings and everything. Besides, you heard the leaks and rumors. The Chief was found by the _Infinity_ and picked up on Requiem. A Spartan-II, here? It can only be that big son-of-a bitch."

Buck wasâ€| slightly surprised. He had some experience with Spartans. IIIs to be specific. Once being saved by a squad back on Reach. From

what he remembered, these bastards were a lot better than him. And they always said the Spartan-IIs were probably the best soldiers ever created.

Buck remembered hearing a story from a fellow trooper how some teenaged Spartan-II once got into a fight with about four other ODSs. He ended up permanently injured all of them and killed one of them, or was it two? In any event, Buck took it in silence while Romeo couldn't contain his laughter on how a kid kicked all of their asses.

All Buck knew was that if the Spartans-IIs were half the legend the stories, rumors, and propaganda made them out to be, then it wouldn't be so bad to have the best of the best of the best work with them.

He saw Mickey and Rookie already waiting for them at the bullet train station.

â€|

"Yes. We are redeploying back into combat. It ain't back to Requiem this time, it's to a new, possibly fun planet." Major Marcus Stacker said in his heavy southern US accent.

"Ah, _bullshit_."

"What the fuck?"

"Fucking' A."

"This close to getting _fucking laid_."

"Does this mean we get to shoot more stuff?"

Ah. The constant complaints from the marines. Oh how Dubbo still felt like one of them.

"And yes. It is first contact, people. And yes, yes. I understand all of your well addressed complaints." Stacker continued. "But you can take that up with our most honorable and most wise High Com'mand. Humanity, as always, is at stake. We are to deploy as the first wave to secure a foothold on the planet.

"Lieutenant Dubbo."

First Lieutenant Chip Dubbo stood from the group of marines in green and white combat uniforms, standing on the opposite end of the black armor of ODS soldiers.

Dubbo stood next to Major Stacker on the stack of boxes in the center of the crowd, energetic as always. The hanger bay was cramped with ships and crews strapping them down and readying for slipspace, and Spartan-IVs trying to act all superior as they headed to their assigned stations. It would be another twenty minutes before they exited the solar system.

"Right, mates." Dubbo began in his heavy Australian accent, excited and youthful. "Admittedly, we don't know what exactly will be our assignments-

"Jesus _Christ_."

"I love these kinda plans-"

"Shut it, you wankers." Chip said. "The Elites are already deployed. Expect joint operations. Hopefully they left a couple bastards for us. For now, report to your sergeants and prepare your pods just in case. If the xeno AA is too heavy for atmospheric entry, we'll be the first into hell."

"_Enjoy it_, boys. This is exactly what you signed up for, whether you like it or not." Stacker said for Dubbo. "Dismissed. And I swore to _God_ if I hear one compliant from you jackasses I'm tossing you out the airlock."

With that, the group dispersed, remaining quiet at least in front of their COs. Soon enough, it was only Dubbo and Stacker left. Colonel Buck and friends exited from the bullet train that connected to the hanger.

Chip couldn't help but sympathize with the men too. He was also on a relaxing leave, in the continent down under with his mum. Then out of the bloom he got a report on his UN email to report back immediately or face court martial, etc., etc., etc.

When the crowd left, Dubbo sighed, slightly relieved. Lieutenant Dubbo tried to imitate whatever poor leadership skill he had from his old NCO, the Sarge. His badass demeanor always inspiring Dubbo and the men, even though the Sarge thought Dubbo was kinda an idiot, but still. After the War, when everyone was allowed to go home, when a lot of his surviving friends in the marines quit and went back to their families, Dubbo signed back up. The marines were his life. Semper Fi. He couldn't imagine what he would do without it. A regular job? College? Getting married? ...Actually getting his driver's licence? It didn't seem to interest him. But he didn't hold against the guys who decided to stay home, move on with their lives the best they could. The War was a lot to handle. However he did miss their funny commentary in the face of complete annihilation.

So why did he join the ODSs then? Away from Naval command to...NAVSPECWAR. Well, for one whatever of his friends were still in the military moved up or joined the special branch. And it offered more promotion and pay grade... Semper Fidelis. Either way, the ODSs, their culture, still felt completely like the marines. Army personnel who were chosen to move up and retrain were in cultural shock, essentially being introduced to the marines with drop pods. Even then, a lot of the former ODS marines still felt like marines, even when they called themselves Shock Troopers.

After Dubbo got signed, he immediately got promoted to corporal. Pretty much everyone did. Then before he knew it, he was promoted to sergeant, staff sergeant, and then eventually first lieutenant, reassigned to the _Infinity_ under Stacker and Reynolds. It was a relief to work under old friends again at least, under a larger operation than they could ever imagine. They had reached a higher rank than the Sarge.

That was very strange to think. It was always strange. To the grunts, Dubbo was a veteran. A legend almost, one of the marines to serve

with the Master Chief in the Great War, along with Major Stacker and Major Reynolds. The greenbacks always tried to pry him. They always asked if the propaganda told to the public about the end of the Great War was true, if the Spartans were good as they say they were. He said it was, like a good lapdog to Naval Intelligence, never mentioning the Ark or how he actually was the one to kick everyone's ass. But besides little annoyances, he was respected and held in high esteem as a veteran and an officer. But Dubbo didn't feel like a veteran. He was barely twenty-one for crying-out-loud while the Sarge was almost sixty.

Well—by technicalities Dubbo was only eighteen, and the Sarge was actually in his early fifties. Relativity was always strange. So was Cryosleep... He understood why time was slower but he didn't _understand _why time was going slower. Ships only go under one percent light speed for weeks to a few months at a time during patrol, so it wasn't as if it was centuries later when the ship decelerated, but over time the fast-forward hours accumulated for all marines and naval personnel.

Dubbo and Stacker went to meet them, the group forming around the train entrance.

"Colonel, sir. We're readying our men for deployment. Everything is in order so far—as it always does before disaster."

"Good." The Colonel said. He wore civilian clothes, looking very odd him. Blue jeans, with a white shirt and an unbuttoned leather jacket. An underage uniform for a man in his late thirties. "I'm giving the battalion a special assignment. Stacker, you'll be leading them.

"Intelligence suggests a large cluster of high-rise buildings and other structures residing near a lake."

"You mean, a city, sir?" Stacker said. "Very common around these parts."

"Yes, Major, a city." Buck said. Dubbo didn't know the Colonel very well, but he either always sounded annoyed or dumbfounded. There was no in-between. "We don't know what's in there, but I can assure you it's hell. I'm not going to risk any men in that shithole, but from vague geographical scans there will most likely be some AA batteries near or even in the city. I'm going to deploy your battalion to take them out, if any. Major Stacker, you'll lead them. Because of the possible danger, I'll try to muster whatever Spartans Commander Palmer will let me. If there is any AA in the city, connect with me and we'll assess the situation from there.

"In the event of a non-drop, we'll probably deploy in the hills and establish footholds." Buck sidenoted.

"Rodger that. We get the fun fioght." Dubbo said.

****One mile outside Nos Astra, 2186 Citadel Calendar, 09:53****

The Mako continued on its sloppy course. Shepard could see some sort of station ahead, an antenna tower similar to the ones he seen on Palaven. A concentrated center of intersecting trenches, small mobile station centers hidden by an assemble of rolling hills.

He could see small figures holding weapons, dressed in variety of armor, looking highly unorganized and irregular.

Illium Militia. Mostly made of Illium police and SWAT team members, various Asari soldiers stationed planetside, brave citizens, slaves (Illium did allow it here), mercenaries, and so on.

The rain becoming heavier as clouds thickened to mask sunlight in white rays. The majestic purple ship laid about half-a-kilometer above Nos Astra. Curtains of water suddenly stopping its track towards the city and leaving it protected. The main parabola seemed larger than the rest of the ship, nearly scrapping whatever high-rise buildings' were left. The end of the parabola not connected to the ship was straightened, protecting part of the rough data-chip. Reaper AA near the city didn't seem to engage yet. Maybe the ship took them out.

Everyone didn't say a word. The entire cabin only filled with the white noise. Tali didn't even try to finish up the repairs. Another exaggerated bounce over a rolling hill. Shepard didn't even notice it. Thisâ€|thisâ€|

Hail humans? They already knew what the name of Shepard's species? They were watching themâ€|they were always watching them. They knew who they wereâ€| but then why only address humans? Why only appear now?

Small dots ejected from the ship. There was about maybe five or six, barely visible from the cameras. Shepard wasn't sure, so he zoomed in. They were outlines of a traveling object. A transport of some sorts. They were heading in different directions is seemed. He wasn't sure, but one of them seemed to be heading in hisâ€| Noâ€|no it wasn'tâ€|

"No Eezoâ€|" Tali began. Her voice was completely empty. "Thisâ€|the ship's architecture, is so unlike the _Legend After _or the other two ships. It's completely different in almost every way possible from mere observation."

There was other ready chatter, on encrypted channels on the Mako's radio Tali fixed up. Illium militia panicking over what the hell was now over their city. Mixed orders to open fire or not. Complete and utter chaos. But through the noise, Shepard caught word of 'Council' and 'immediate high-priority report'.

Liara for a moment placed her hand over her mouth, just watching the cameras. Shock. Not even a hint of contemplation like she would normally do. About a third-of-a mile passed before she removed her hand and spoke. "Tali's right. Either that means two completely different species, or the _Legend After _was an ancient relic, but I'm only saying that because this ship seemsâ€| beautiful, far more advancedâ€| and larger."

Who the hell were these people? While Liara and Tali reviewed possibly thousands of questions about these aliens, Shepard had only a simple if not vague question. Maybe it didn't hit him until that moment. No Eezo..., somehow entering the Relays without it. He remembered the words of Sovereign, the frightful abomination. When a species found the Relays, they develop towards a predetermined

technological path. And how so this cycle was no exception. How the Reapers can eliminate all biological life on a whim as if they were God. So who were they? To avoid almost any sign of Prothean or any other type of Eezo technology and completely defy the Reapers outright?

"A million questions. I understand." Shepard said. "But we have to find those ship survivors or make contact with theâ€¦ _Shadow of Intent _crew and establish relations."

The two only agreed in silence.

The Illium militia base became a clear outline. A mixture of mostly Asari soldiers, Krogans, Turians, Batarians, Vorcha, and Salarrians. The Mako slowed down, passing by trenches in front of defensive walls, coming to a stop at the command center. It looked similar to the Turian base on Palaven, except filled with a variety of species and multiple gunships being prepped for combat by repair crews. A heavily armed Asari, possibly a commando, made her way to Shepard's group as they exited the vehicle, thank God.

The Asari held a Disciple Shotgun, a common weapon amongst them. Her armor seemed to have the same problem as Shepard's, sagging and loose. There was a lieutenant ranking on her collar.

Sounds of distant combat, repair tools, and heavy rain, filled the air. Men given orders with the stomping of boots to fulfill them. Shepard began to notice none of the gunships were on, no computer terminals. The only ones doing anything were engineers and mechanics with glitchy Omni-tools and other repair equipment near electrical conduits of the command structures.

"Lieutenant, I'm-" Shepard began.

"Yeah, literally almost everyone in the galaxy knows who you are, Commander Shepard. Special Tactics and Reconnaissance, blah, blah, blah. I didn't expect the Council would send someone this fast." The Lieutenant began. "I'm Lieutenant Kurin, Asari commando. I'm commanding officer of this outer city evac center. My community sent me and my team to reinforce positions and train the local militia and help out local Alliance defenses. Fortunately both groups had the situation handled as much as you could during a Reaper invasion until now! Now we got that gigantic crashed ship, the EMP, and now this thing. Christ, half of the weapons on my soldiers are out just for show."

"That's why we're here, Lieutenant." Shepard said. "Get on the comms, tell anyone out there who's listening to not engage the alien ship unless fired upon first."

"Rodger. Repair teams just got the comms online, but it's a bit shaky. Might take a moment. Some of the radios within the city still might be out."

"How long?"

"Five, ten minutes at most. I'm still directing most of the repair corps to start up the transports. Civilians that make it from the city get sent up."

Shepard understood, not arguing with the Lieutenant about the morally correct decision. He ordered Tali to try and continue weapons and armor repairs. It took her a moment to respond, still staring at the ship, heading back into the Mako after a while.

The Commander took a moment, leaning back on the rear of the Mako. He noticed a good portion of soldiers turned from their duties, staring at the ship as rays of light passed it by along with water droplets that pattered their faces. Every once and a while there was a howling wind, striking against Shepard's check.

Liara joined him, standing in front of him with arms crossed. "Ever since I joined your crew I always thought I've seen everything the galaxy had to offer. I guess I've forgotten how insignificant we are, despite how far we've come...there's so much we still don't know."

"Well we've only discovered, what was it? One percent of the galaxy? There's still possibly thousands of species hidden in the galaxy."

"You would think with advanced technology, and the abundance of the Relays, they would've made contact sooner. Maybe the Reapers forced them to come out of hiding."

Shepard could see a Reaper destroyer land about sixty kilometers away, paying no attention to the base or the alien ship as it engaged targets in the hills. Blue Eezo bolts firing back at it in vain.

"Are you saying the Reapers are in the middle of attacking them?"

"Iâ€¦wouldn't say that. It might've been possible the Reapers never found them. These people have broken the entire system of cycles the Reapers have built."

"That's why I'm trying to stay optimistic." Shepard said, crossing his arms. "They broke the cycle, maybe they can help us break ours."

"You've been thinking about this, haven't you?"

Shepard shrugged. "Recently."

She didn't say anything for a moment, looking to the alien ship. There was a round of blue light firing off the ship. Small dashes that ignited within the city, painting the entire landscape and the people within it.

"One must wonder what kind of atrocities they face in order to build something purely frightening as this." She finally said.

"You see them as frightening?"

"Tali might see them as achievements. Shocked from what was thought impossible. Marvels of engineering. That's undeniable, but you have to wonder what reason do they have for building and keeping a vast amount of ships? What have they faced to reach such a level? Before we met Sovereign, which seems like it was ages ago, I would've said

with confidence this ship is the product of... accidental progression. They developed for such a long time, that Eezo seemed trivial and unneeded. That these are the most powerful ships they possess in order to deal with the hidden magnitude of a relatively new threat. Or maybe, they've been at a technological height for so long, that these ships such as the _Legend After_ are pathetic and small to them... Dozens of theories. How easy they can overpower us. How similar everyone really is."

"Similar?"

"They still discovered the Relays. And they developed on a war-set path, similar to the Krogan, similar to the Turians. All of us. As much as the Asari, for example, want to claim we're so 'peaceful' and 'superior', we still have this violent subconscious and ultimately unending conflict and pitiful hatred towards one another. If we were really peaceful, we would have no need for biotics or commandos. It was only a matter of time, before another species would come and make us look like fools, but... Not in this way. Not the same thing again."

Shepard was silent for a moment before speaking. "That's a part of being a person. With individualistic minds with a culture and society built by people, there'll always be problems. Just now, the Reapers are forcing the best of people and suppressing the worst of everyone. Now more than ever, we can build a better future. We just..."

"Have to win this." Liara said. "... Shepard... I don't share your optimism, but I hope you're right. And I hope that whoever these new people are, prove to be better people than we can hope to ever be. For our sake. We've already been through enough. We can't let the unity and sudden determination fade...if we get past this."

Shepard nodded, looking back to the Reaper. "I'll be honest, nowadays... my optimism is harder and harder to maintain."

She also looked past Shepard, a sympathetic and sad smile formed. She turned those blue eyes back to him. "Believe me, I know."

Before Shepard could answer, someone pointed out something in the distance, alerting everyone else of the incoming object.

Shepard turned from Liara, stepping out from behind the Mako and saw what it was.

A purple ship with blue lights about thirty meters in length, a curved W made up its roof. Two small cylinders attached to opposite side, flowing into flat slides that revealed a grey panel. Three large mounted guns with one at the curved underside near the front of the ship. The other two guns were mounted on the side, next to the grey panel with triangular figures mounting them. Majestic like its mothership.

It made a low humming noise as it quickly moved in, creating a blue beam of light with the ship and surface, dropping something onto the ground.

It yelled something.

"_Wort, wort, wort, wort_."

5. Contact

****Aboard Pelican transport****

****One kilometer out from unidentified xeno city****

****2557 Military Calendar, 09:59****

When the Elites came down from the sky, full wrath of the Fleet of Retribution engaging every squid, it was a mixture of slight distrust and fucking salvation.

HIGHCOM sent in the sharks. Of course they did, the same ones who glassed Reach, Crystal Cove, Chi Ceti, so on. But Mark could see through the prejudice unlike the others. The Elites were reliable. That was a strange staple of their species. They owed Humanity a debt in their minds. In the end of the Great War, the Elites viewed Humanity helping them destroy the Flood and the Covenant instead of the other way around. Nobody will say it, but without the Elites, Humanity and Earth would be a fungus paradise. However, without the Master Chief, along with the heroics of Sergeant Major Johnson and Commander Miranda Keyes now decorated legends within the UNSC, the Elites would be long dead.

Whichever way it's viewed, the Elites also had to honor the Human species when Lord Hood secured their government with the UNSC _Infinity_ in 2553, and the UNSC's work to help the Arbiter take his revenge war against the Covenant remnants. So, it wasn't as if the Elites were waiting to stab them in the back.

Both Pelicans at the time were already in route to pick up another group of pod survivors near the city under Lieutenant Duvall. They were getting beaten badly by squid bastards. But before they got there, the _Shadow of Intent_ slipped in from exosphere, launching type-52 Phantoms immediately to crash sites.

"Can anyone get a line through?" Florence said, in particular to Contradiction.

The AI spoke through Lucy's helmet. That electronic echo within the helmet painted every word. "Fucking Elitesâ€¦ They're still using Covenant encrypted channels from the War. Ah, give me a moment."

"Right. Tell Morganson to follow our Pelican. IFF tags on brights, get it screaming on every channel."

Orders were filled out, leaving Mark to himself again. The injured still gripped their wounds, with critical in a state of forced slumber. The one critical, face completely caked in blood, biofoam and other biomass materials forming a pool in his chest. He might've been seventeen or eighteen. Some greenback kid. Here for who the hell knows. It came down to him dying on cold metal in a shaky transport.

"Let's hope the Elites have doctors aboard who know something about Human anatomy." Mark said to Lieutenant Banks. According to Naval Intelligence, the Elites considered doctors the lowest of society.

Getting wounds healed was considered... "dishonorable" but apparently not idiocy. Either way, Human anatomy wouldn't be in their knowledge, being unneeded. It might've changed from their days out of the Covenant, but it wasn't sure. "It not, we still might have to wait for UNSC reinforcements."

"Yeah. The men seem stable, for the moment. So, that's the best we got." Banks said, rather curt and seeming to trail off.

Mark turned from the poor kid when Banks began nodding. From Mark's observations, he seemed anxious, possibly nervous. It could be from the possibility of forcing to meet up with the Elites. However, as Mark thought about it Banks was extremely nervous before contact with the Fleet of Retribution. But well, his men were on the verge of death. Mark probably displayed the same set of physical characteristics. Yet there was something about Banks that Mark couldn't place.

He looked like a normal marine, a man in his late thirties, dark circles, along with the usual features that marked a veteran of the Great War. However it wasn't him that Mark took cue, it was from Lucy. She was watching him, maybe. A helmet turned to his direction, no subtlety at all. Why though wouldn't be understood now.

The wounded were strapped as tight as possible. Mark felt the sudden pressure as the Pelican increased altitude. He headed towards the cockpit, finding Tom at controls.

For the moment, they were heading home, hopefully. With utter consequences. He wouldn't know how HIGHCOM and ONI would react to the Captain's decision. He'll face the punishment, for his crew. If trial was under that bitch Admiral Osman, no doubt he would meet the barrels of a firing squad. Under Lord Hood and his fleet admiral subordinates of HIGHCOM, there was no telling. Hopefully whatever is left of his crew go home, peacefully, take a long shore leave from this disaster of an operation.

"Hey, Captain. I'm making my ascent. Everything checks out, Morganson is following close behind. Let's just hope the Elites will get to our boys fast enough." Tom said, full attention as the Pelican scrapped by burning buildings.

Rain continued to battle against the fires where the _Shadow of Intent _wasn't covering, and a layer of grey and darkness where the clouds were thickest. There were ships moving in the buildings. A low level fog settled within the city, helping conceal movement. In all, this reminded him too much of Reach in the planet's final days. The burning of New Alexandria and evacuation in the boneyards on second-rate ancient ships under Code Omega-three. When Reach command called on this order then completely went off air, everything ran for their lives. All was truly lost. Marines, army, ONI, naval, civilian. All breaking through the gates to the boneyards like wild animals, trampling over each other. Mark was just one of them, trying to do his best to maintain control.

But who knows what's going on here. How many civilians were down there, how many bodies piled up? Blue and red lasers, unidentified contacts and the squids. For all Mark knew, this was a squid city and were the ones fighting for their lives. Mark and his crew were they invaders, and they were frightened. Fighting like hell for their

homes and familiesâ€|or whatever concept of home and family these xenos have. But their disturbing figures removed any sympathy for them. Changed and enhanced on a scary scale. Abominations.

"You're a Spartan, weren't you Tom? Ever get offered to join the IVs?" Mark said.

"Well, sir, Lord Hood actually personally talked toâ€|whatever IIs and IIIs and discouraged us from taking the offer from ONI to join up with the IVs." He said.

"Really? I thought you were under ONI's jurisdiction already?"

"NAVSPECWAR originally, but now we bounce around with SPARTAN OP nowadays."

It wasn't surprising. HIGHCOM and ONI hold so much distrust; it was poisoning to say the least. But it never altered or halted the UNSC's ultimate goal. When the 'Spartan Branch' was created, everyone within the Navy smelled it from a mile away for what it truly was. A highly bureaucratic process caused by ONI as they tried to spread away the Navy's control over the Spartans. The product? A military branch without a clearly defined structure with independent fireteam groups unlike a regular military branch that's been pretty much the same for centuries. Untraditional at the least and highly disorganized at the most save for the Spartans aboard naval ships. Squads were listed, sure, but can easily disappear out of the bloom? Immediately replaced by a quickly snatched up group from the ODSTs, say, and lost in the mesh?

Mark could press on. But if they worked for ONIâ€|.

"Any interesting missions?"

"Some, sir. But this mission can be considered a highlight." Tom said, rather uncomfortable.

Mark nodded, friendly, a slightly forced smile. It became clear that Tom didn't know how to deal with this. Spartans had a reputation of weak social skills, at least from what Mark heard. He could tell now. Mark was peeling into sanitized records, classified. And Tom said 'mission' not the usual words people would use for operations like these, such as "tour" or "deployment". A mission.

For what?

"Stand by, sir. Unidentified radar contact closing in at pursuit speed, drag by thirty-five, sixty miles out. Angels three, steady over the deck, dodging on top from building to building. Nose pointed at us." Tom said, a flashing red dot on a radar screen.

"Fucking Christ." Mark responded, grabbing for the command seat above Tom.

Mark activated the screen. Two screens, radar and weapons control panel. The radar showed exactly what Tom said. Unidentified flight, one bogey. Luckily, since he was flying at angels three, the buildings were giving no interference. But he was beginning to descend fast, sudden halts, reaching the tops of the skyscraper. It

could've possibly been a VTOL, like the Pelican. Must've been hell to be in the cargo hold with that sudden turn.

"Not falling for this twice. Right, get to angels point five, start maneuvering between buildings. Prep weapons, keep the cargo door closed unless needed. Get Morganson in front of us."

"Wait. Unidentified contact hailing on unknown encrypted channel. FM frequency. Christ, sudden dive to our angels. Fifty clicks out, gaining."

"Get them on the horn." Mark said, quickly removing himself from the chair and making his way to the back.

Lucy was ready at the back, holding a M41 Surface-to-surface rocket launcher she got from the weapons compartment above the seats. The other marines and the engineer still tended to the wounded, securing them.

"Lucy," Mark yelled towards the cargo hold, to the Spartan. "Open the hatch and spin up the gun. Fire at all incoming ships at my orders!"

From hearing the Captain, the hatch propped upon, releasing the two metal connecting doors for Lucy to ready and produce a whirling wipe of disturbed air with the twisting of the metal barrel to the M247H. Rocket ready, locking on.

"Accept the hail," Florence ordered, immediately speaking into the horn. "This is Captain Mark Florence of the United Nations Space Command to unidentified vessel, you are entering our radar airspace and will be considered a pursuing target. Back off immediately, or we will use deadly force."

At first static broke, coherent words, yet fluency prevailed.

"Th-â€¦i-â€¦.This is Lieutenant Leng transmitting to unidentified vessel. We mean no harm. We're evacuating local survivors from escape pods sites to be delivered to you. You are entering unsecured airspace; we were sent out to protect you and possibly bring you back to your homelands."

****One kilometer outside Nos Astra, 2186 Citadel Calendar, 10:00****

"I said drop the weapons!" The Turian sergeant, dressed in standard black armor with red display lights and M-15 Vindicator standard to the Turian military, aimed down the sights. Body in combat stance and personal kinetic barriers ready for attack.

Lieutenant Kurin aimed her Disciple, sight targeted with Eezo possibly going off like a grenade or refusing to work in her hands with an unstable thermal clip. The transport stayed still, those tiny, gas-masked figures using small hands to aim their turret at every person

"Sergeant, I don't think this is appropriate. Just put your weapons downâ€¦" Liara said, trying to calm the situation. She placed her hand on the rifle, trying to gently lower the Turian's gun. The soldier didn't budge, only shouldering the weapon.

"Ma'am, we are enforcing First Contact Procedure. We must deem them hostile until they prove otherwise!" He responded.

Since when did Illium care about Citadel procedure? Or were they so frightened of the unknown they turned to itâ€|

"Human, I would tell your imbeciles to remove their weapons before they make the mattersâ€|_worst_. We were sent by your people to return you to the safety of the _Infinity_." The large beast, dressed in pearl white armor, ordered in a threat so common to roll off his tongue in a deep and commanding voice trending on the verge of a Latinistic tone. It was the same one broadcasting the FM signal, the Shipmaster of the _Shadow of Intent_.

The other hulky monsters prepped to fulfill his orders, taken position to aim those weapons topped with intimidating, large bright purple crystals sticking out from the dark weapons. Other weapons were blue coated arms with a single electrical current traveling between the tips of the opening. The holders of these weapons had large, muscular, lizard-like bodies standing taller above everyone in the area, even the Krogans. Leading to an upper jaw and four mandibles holding an interior of sharp teeth that made up its mouth, a under opening where their jaw should've been. Most bore dark purple armor, forming to their digitigrade legs of the body and their tetradactyl hands. The helmet rose from black under armor to a curved war mask, forming to a sharp tip near the end, giving them a appearance of a shark, producing the same intimidating appearance as their weapons. Their eyes, glaring in what was to be called anger appeared in yellow glows from those helmets, turning from the twenty Illium militia soldiers to Shepard. All these monsters stayed in a slouch position, readying like the Turians, waiting upon the orders of the obvious commander, forcefully removed of two mandibles on his right side, scarring his face, and leaving a mark of experience and tiredness showing in the yellow eyes.

In all, there were about eleven, including the leader. Each stood in the open, as if unafraid of what the militia or Shepard's squad will do. They formed into a circle position, aiming their weapons at a soldier. Their transport still hovered above, gunners on ready. Whoever they were, the gunners were defiantly not the species on the ground

"Sir, I understand this is a little tense. But contact procedure, article eight dash nine paragraph three, state that you must lay down your weapons or else we have to consider you a hostile threat. We won't open fire at you, you have my word. We just want to make sure you aren't hostile" The Lieutenant said. Her arms seem to slightly shake. Shepard's were too, under the heavy weight of the loose armor. That was it.

Hell, Shepard's weapon won't even fire, or it'll just blow up Tali was still in the Mako on Shepard's orders, quickly trying to repair as fast as possible, making sure Cortez is still alright. Maybe Tali would start up the Mako's weapons, just in case. But before it comes to that, Shepard needed to try everything to come at peace.

"I'm not here for your will. I came in the name of my allies to retrieve this man and return him to the _Infinity_." The pearl armored beast retorted, slowly grasping at a small black cylinder

that was strapped to his belt, edged with grips and curved to fit the palm. The cylinder was engraved with mysterious carvings, slightly unclear from where Shepard was standing. Whatever it was, it was the only weapon the leader had.

"You sure have a funny way of showing it!" Turian sergeant yelled. "Look, you either drop your weapons now or we will be forced to take hostile measures."

"Shut it, Staff Sergeant." Kurin responded.

"This command cannot be fulfilled after the way you have treated us. Hand over the Reclaimer, and we shall be on our way." The monster said.

"Drop your goddamn weapons!" The Turian sergeant barked, purposely threatening by letting the small click signaling deactivation of the safety ring.

The monster grasped the cylinder, removing it from his belt to present a display of purple light crafted to a sharp oval hilt forming around the hinge of the cylinder, holding sparks of auroras. The oval didn't connect at both ends, the rounded symmetrical edges halted, with one side creating a guard that encompassed the monster's hand, past the hilt. The other side spanned out into two thinning blades, modeling a thin sword. Both these blades didn't connect, sharpened into tipped points. Electrical currents traveled within the opening between the blade. The purple light made the black skin and white armor of the beast glow along with surrounding areas. Overall, the sword was about a length of four and-a-half feet.

One of the other monsters stood at his side as subordinate, dressed in a red variant of the trooper armor. This one carrying an elongated purple rifle with a thinly scope and stretched bottom hilt that ran along the ulna (or where the ulna would be if he were human), creating five feet of length, looking quite small in the his hands.

"If you will not hand him over!" The commander raised his sword along with his voice. "Warriors, burn their mongrel hides!"

"Wait! wait, wait!" Shepard said, rushing from besides the Mako to stand in between the weapons of the two groups along with Liara. The two had their rifles holstered, raising their hands in surrender, as if there were a point. "Look, I have no idea what you're talking about. I was sent here by my superiors to secure the surviving crew of the crashed ship, UNSC Legend After."

"Ah, then you were sent as a hunter, as our allies have commanded us?" The commander said.

"Maybe I can help. I'm Doctor Liara T'Soni. I specialize! well, I specialize in archeology. But, anyways, this is the first time Shepard and I, including these soldiers, have witnessed your species. We've never heard of this ship, Legend After, Shadow of Intent, or whatever this Infinity is until now! If you were ordered to return a "human" to this ship, then at least explain why and who ordered you to! And also, explain why you called him a "Reclaimer"."

She seemed less calm, excited. The situation suppressed any of that. If it were less hostile, she would be rolling over millions of questions on culture, history, everything about them.

"You claim of ignorance?" The commander asked, perplexed by the presented information, looking to his subordinate, who only shrugged. He looked back to the militia. "And what of them?"

"They're only scared of what you'll do. We've never meet, of course they would have an aggressive attitude to protect themselves." Shepard said, still calm despite everything he felt.

"I find it hard to believe you have never met us, Human. Even in the days of our false Covenant?" The commander said.

"What the fuck is he talking about?" A Turian said.

"Shut it!" Liara responded, looking back in a threatening way then turning forth. "Can you answer our questions?"

"For who ordered us, it was his Shipmaster of Shipmasters." He said, pointing to Shepard.

Well that helped.

"Can you give us a name?" Liara said.

"_He _knows him by the call Lord Hood." He said. "As upon his request, we were sent into the holy the artifact to retrieve the survivors and return them. We assumed you were one of the survivors, yet you claim you are not, Reclaimer."

Shepard was one of the survivors? What? He didn't even look anywhere near like one of them

Shepard didn't respond, confused. And a response was given not by the alien commander, or his comrades, but of a high pitched screech from the walls beyond, followed by the mixed noises of gunfire and flashes of light. Kurin opened up her glitchy Omni-tool, turned to the holo-projector, finding red dots encroaching the base camp.

"Reaper attack! Staff Sergeant, gather your men and prep any available gunship squadrons! All men to combat stations! This is not a drill!"

An even farther distance away the emergency alarm sounded from the communications towers, a deafening roar. Shepard could see marauders leading dozens of cannibals supported by ravengers and husks. Militia soldiers took cover either within the trenches or behind defensive walls. Some of them began to peak from cover, firing off weapons as the Reapers engaged. Theirs could've possibly already been repaired, or were lucky and didn't get affected by the EMP. A pair of harvesters flew across the defense, carrying preemptive strikes, balls of red and black light that threw bodies in the air, dead before impact.

One of the harvesters struck the alien transport, attaching itself onto it and using its cannon to carve a hole in the ship. The mounted gunner panicked. Shepard could swear he heard a high-pitched squeal. A patterning sound as blue flares attacked the Harvester, fires

erupting and energy burning through its armor like paper.

The aliens turned towards the Reaper attack garrisons. His subordinate handed the alien commander one of the blue electrical weapons. He grasped it, sword in other hand, completely charging the Reapers head on, no thought for his men or own safety

"Remove this abomination, Warriors! Grind them into dust!" He said.

His warriors followed, jumping over barricades, moving past friendly troops, who tried not to be dumbstruck. The Commander displayed his sword, then charging into the garrison. His troops fired off flare bolt after bolt, sparks of blue light, making a loud, energized sound. The crystal weapons ignited slow moving pink shards, when each one fired it sounded similar to glass breaking. They followed slowly, similar to the incineration ball on Shepard's Omni-tool.

The bolts burnt through armor, shards pierced the biomass. One Cannibal got a group of pink crystals, exploding in almost an instant in pink and bright purple dust.

The commander trucked a marauder, Reaper round after round deflecting off his shields, sparking a blue electric bubble that surrounded him. He turned towards a cannibal, impaling it with his sword, throwing the lifeless body at another cannibal.

Shepard looked to the Mako entrance, Tali still hunched over a repair station.

"Tali! How much longer?!" Shepard said, staying low in the middle of the open.

"Hold onâ€¦ah, I almost have it!" Tali said. There was a flicker of electricity, and she went to her Omni-tool, typing in commands. "Electrical current reduction, redirecting into subsystems. You littleâ€¦ah, ah, I got it!"

Shepard's armor slowly loss its heavy burden, making slight adjustments to move back into his body mold. He pulled out a weapon block, unfolding completely without difficulty. A white and black M-96 Mattock within his hands. Liara pulled out her M-6 Carnifex, and Tali a M-22 Eviscerator.

Shepard didn't have time to say thanks or even ask how Cortez was, moved forward towards the barricades, reloading another thermal clip just in case, aiming down the scopes with mostly steady accuracy from micro inertia dampeners. One of the other militia members can control the Mako, minding with Cortez in it. Shepard needed to be on the ground, with the aliens. That, and he didn't want to spend another minute in that tank.

He pulled the trigger on a cannibal, round after round of Eezo. The gun violently shook after each shot, the thermal clip moving ordinance to cool down the weapon. Liara followed, using her biotics to charge a ball of singularity, opening in the midst of a group of Reaper husks before they engaged the militia.

The alien commander turned to one of the floating Reapers, tearing a gash within the body of one of the ground troops before turning on

the others and opening up his rifle, one-handed.

Shepard entered cover behind one of the barricades next to the red armored alien as he looked up and opened fire with the elongated rifle. A slash of purple light that bounced back a Husk, immediately turning into ashes. He got to truly realize the size of these aliens, close enough now to show its monstrosity. This particular one was about nine feet tall. The alien could grab Shepard by the neck and left him fifteen feet in the air if he really wanted to. A frightening species, a monster of war.

Shepard looked out, engaged his Omni-tool and used overload EMP to rip through the shields of a Marauder, easily putting him down with a few rounds. Next target, electric grenade from Shepard's Omni-tool, burst of electricity hitting a Cannibal and burning holes through the body.

Out of all the luck, it seems the EMP from the nuclear warheads didn't even effect the Reapers.

Liara and Tali joined him, entering into cover. Tali aimed out her shotgun, opening up a grouping of rounds at charging husks, knocking them on their back where she quickly finished them off.

"Can someone grab that maniac before he gets himself killed!?" Tali said, ducking back into cover.

Shepard looked over the barricade. Militia soldiers in the trenches were being ripped apart, falling back to the barricades with the rest of the platoon. The aliens however, pushed forward. Shields appearing and encompassing their bodies every time a Reaper round hit them. At these tactics, they were suicidal. Idiotic to say the least.

It could've possible been arrogance. Size over the pathetic little aliens. Weapons that can cut through at least biomass armor and weak marauder shields, unknown how they would do against reinforced kinetic or biotic barriers. The ravengers fired, bouncing up dirt and grass, the aliens dodging. One of them was engulfed in a flurry of dirt. Shepard didn't see him come out. The other turned on them, bullets scorching unlike any eezo round Shepard has seen before.

Their transport, with harvester still attached, flipped, gunners falling out and hitting the ground. It engraved into the grass on Shepard's left, about thirty meters away from the nearest his trench. The grey panels ripped open to reveal the insides, half-buried in dirt. The Harvester's body was crushed under the weight, head torn off with bursting electrical wires and red mesh that was once its biological body.

There were three survivors, small individuals that looked nothing like the monsters. Two of them wore a red triangular backpack, far too large for their body. Masks covered their mouths, connected to the backpack. They had oversized arms, with small spikes similar to a crab or lobster back on Earth. A small, slouched body with even tinier, bipedal legs. Overall, they only stood at four feet. A drastic, almost cute, if not ridiculous change from the commander and his men. The little guys held a small, ugly black and purple pistol with green electrical lighting that traveled in the open spaces of the weapon, very similar to the blue rifle.

The third was far different from both species. A scrawny body, with skinny legs and arms. The majority of his body was encased in thin armor, leaving his arms uncovered. His mouth was stretched out, similar to say a dog or the beak of a bird. Eyes were startling, an ugly shade of purple with no evidence of pupils. Rows of tiny razor sharp teeth lined his mouth, along with jagged hair standing on the top of the head. He held the same green pistol and there was a band on his opposite arm, opening up into a circular bright blue shield that covered the majority of their body.

They quickly recovered, taking cover in the wreckage, firing off green bolts that made a slight splattering sound with every shot. It partially slowed down the cannibals and husks. The actual alien muscle seemed too spread to help out, the approximate ten busy with the other enemies. Some of their shields burst apart, light spreading in different directions from more ravenger rounds. The commander and his men fell back into the trenches.

Shepard activated his reinforced tech armor shields. Orange electronic padding laying above the metal suiting. He placed back his Mattock, taking out his Black Widow despite closer range.

His squad mates immediately understood, raising from cover and opening firing. Liara released a singularity again, lifting about three or four Reapers from the ground. Tali released Chatika, a blue ball moving around and crashing into a cannibal and killing him. The Qurian pushed forward, leaping over the barricade, up one on one against a marauder. She used an energy drain, depleted its shield and adding to her own, knocking him off balance with one hit and killing him with another.

Shepard moved from cover, his squad mates out of his sight, sprinting at a sharp left angle. Militia soldiers were forced to pull back from the nearest trench, leaving it abandoned and overturned as Cannibals began to pour in. However, they still provided cover with blue bolts firing overhead.

Burning rounds flew past Shepard, some hitting his kinetic barriers, leaving only residue that scratched his armor or raised microscopic burns across his face. He pushed with the rush, reaching the edge of the trench, filled with Cannibals. He put back his sniper rifle for a moment, made a leaping step on the trench's edge as he lifted his arm back and the Omni-sword forming and stretched forward.

A cannibal turned just in time, a mouth wide open in a screeching rage. The bastard only met the end of the orange saber, plunging into the abyss. It collapsed, legs giving away and arms flopping. Shepard pulled out his M-22 block, transforming into the shotgun. He used his left shoulder and smashed against the dense armor of another cannibal on his left, smacking it against the dirt of the trench walls. Shepard forced him back, a mouth barely away from his face, only held by the tech shields. A burst of rounds from his shotgun directly in a cannibal's face on the right, leaving only disintegration and ashes. He turned towards the held Reaper, pumping up the forend of the weapon. Single-handed, shoved the barrel into the Cannibals and unloaded another round, leaving it to the same fate of ash.

Barely more than five seconds. Two more left. Far enough away from Shepard where he pulled out his Black Widow, quickly unloaded a round

and ripping the arm off one and leaving him to succumb to the dirt. The recoil on this weapon always seemed to threaten to break both hands, inertia dampeners moved in to barely save him. He pushed back the lever of the sniper then forward. Another aim down the scope, forcing down the trigger, ripping a chunk of biomass from the other.

Shepard didn't have time to acknowledge his own work, lifting himself from the trench. A clear shot towards the crash site, Liara and Tali killing off anyone in his path.

A final all-out sprint, lungs pushing against the metal. Feeling constricted despite the combat mold compensating for breathing expansion. He reached the site, sliding into the cover of one of the transport pieces, next to the three small aliens.

He laid on his back, shoulders sitting on the transport wreckage. One of the triangular aliens stood next to him, fully covered by the transport, not even noticing Shepard.

"Are you guys alright?" Shepard said.

The little guy looked to him, jumping up and screaming in panic in a high tone. He fell on his ass, gathered himself quickly, pistol aiming right at Shepard without any concern of weapon safety.

"Yeah, me alright." He said in a relaxed, high-pitched voice. "Me kicking ass and chewing nibble, but me all out of nibble."

Shepard didn't even have a response, but it wasn't out of confusion. A roar spread across the battlefield, its source coming from a heavily armored brute standing on a hill only about fifteen meters away from the aliens' occupied trench. It slouched its body, revealing less vulnerable spots. It charged, claw ready.

It seemed like the commander took a personal offense to this attempt. He removed himself from the trench, standing before the brute with energy sword ready and a body height only slightly shorter than the Reaper.

The commander returned the charge, leaving the blue rifle behind on the dirt. Arms out, sword ready, sprinting. They were only a few feet apart, a complete collision course waiting to happen. As the brute swung its sword leftwards, the commander dodged right, a full jump. He got in close and gripped the brute's chest plate, wrapping his arms around the Reaper's shoulder. The energy sword dug into the metal armor and biomass near its jutting spinal bones without effort. He repeatedly stabbed it, quickly forcing the Brute to its knees. The Reaper used its claw and tore the grip off.

The other more so warrior-like aliens charged forth afterwards, defending their commander and pushed whatever Reapers back from the conflict. Tali and Liara soon enough used the clear path and joined with Shepard. The little guy jumped again at the two's presence, almost opening fire.

The other aliens didn't help the commander though. It was his own battle. Some of them were opened from engagement, yet only watching. The three small aliens only engaged the Reaper advancement. The creepy looking one using his shields to defend the other two small

aliens.

The brute grabbed the dirt of Illium, using it as a foundation as it sliced its sword in the air, trying to reach the commander. He jumped back, unfortunately allowing the creature to completely turn around, getting back on its feet. Another idiotic charge from the Reaper.

This time, the commander leaned down his left shoulder, something similar to Shepard's tactic earlier. He aimed at the creature's right side, the one without the claw. A direct hit within the depression between the jut spinal bone and where the neck tubing connected to the main biomass. He right hooked the creature's belly with the sword, cutting directly between the heavy body armor. The commander used his strength, pushing the Brute down.

His final move was an immediate slash of the neck tubing, cutting off the Turian-like head.

His alien subordinates, led by his second command still pushed onward, now backed up by Illium militia men, seeing the initiative and taking it. Momentum pushed them forward. The commander admired his work, breathing heavily as his entire body shook with every chest expansion. He didn't even notice the fighting until a stray round hit his shields. The alien turned towards Shepard and his friends, walking calmly, mandibles hanging open with anger in eyes.

There were maybe about seven aliens left, the other three lying unmoving in various spots on the battlefield. They took up an enormous space.

He reached Shepard, energy of the sword disappearing into the hilt, holstering it. He looked to the three small aliens as if he were in disgust. The three just continued fighting.

"You fight well, Reclaimer. As does your companions." The commander said. "Even if it were for these mere runts."

Well that showed a lot about their people. The commander continued. "I shall call another transport. We must redraw quickly, human. Our ships can only hold off the bastards for so long."

"Well, you seem to be holding them off a lot better than we are." Tali said. "Either way, you didn't answer our questions earlier."

"Nor do I have the time or will. Truly, if you are ignorant of the situation then all questions shall be answered aboard my ship."

They were going aboard that thing? A completely unknown ship with God knows what's up there? Shepard was not going alone if so.

"I'm not going unless I can bring my 'companions' along and you can guarantee my safety." Shepard said, leaning back and crossing his arms, looking up towards the beast.

"I do not understand you're reasoning why you would even bring up a proposition like this. Harm will only come if you threaten us. As for your companions, I was not ordered to bring these people back to your clan. But if you must then it is none of my concern. I did not know

you had other allies aboard your ship"

Why the hell did they seem to know Shepard? Or acted like they do at least? Did they not even care they were making first contact? Okay, there was humans. But what about the Qurians? Asari? No surprise, honor, anything that goes along with First Contact? There seemed to be no way to convince them otherwise, towards the truth, that this commander didn't know Shepard. That Shepard wasn't whatever the alien thought a "Reclaimer" was. Were they watching them the whole time, and just called humanity by this title? What were they reclaiming exactly? They already knew the name of Shepard's species. This was the first they ever meet. Could he not explain anything? Shepard had to set them straight, but for the moment there wasn't enough time. He had to get on their ship.

Shepard also looked to the militia and Lieutenant Kurin as she led the soldiers onwards. They still had to fight on.

What about them?

Liara noticed the gaze, looking to him. She knew what he was thinking "They'll be okay, Shepard. If this works out, everyone can be saved."

It was reassuring, and probably a tactical sound option. Piling possibly thousands of refugees aboard an unknown ship with aliens of an unknown psychological state wasn't safe.

"Alright, let's head aboard-"

Another blaring alarm from the _Normandy_. An orange symbol appearing on his Omni-tool. For a moment, Shepard debated answering, mostly for the patience of the commander. It appeared on Tali and Liara's too.

Urgent. It would be wise to stay informed of every event in the situation.

Shepard answered. Again, Joker's 'calming' voice spoke. "Commander! Cerberus vessel entered the solar system not more than twenty minutes ago. Two dozen transports launched at super-FTL speeds, slipped under to thermosphere about five-hundred kilometers away from the city, under the aliens' exosphere defensive position. EDI's got them locked. One of them is gaining on the two transports."

"I thought you couldn't launch any shuttles due to the aliens? How did they manage?"

"It looked a little like _Saving Private Ryan_, Commander." Joker said.

"Launch the secondary transport, it can swing around and pick up my squad, then we can-"

"Negative, we're in high orbit, almost three-hundred thousand miles. The transport does not have the speed to make it in time at the rate and distance the Cerberus transports are at."

Shepard looked to the commander, who looked more perplexed than ever. A small twist of the head like a confused dog.

The transports didn't have enough speed. But the _Normandy_ did. It's density-to-thrust index far above any Kodiak shuttle, and little to no halter in an atmospheric pressure setting like Illium.

"Something's wrong. Two transports are being attacked. They're in danger." Shepard said to the commander.

"We have stood here long enough. This was an all-out, as your people call it, "catch-and-grab"." _What my people call it? _"But we shall leave no one behind. We will launch a transport, pull out to the Forerunner artifact and maneuver our way through. The Arbiter shall personally lead this transport if necessary."

Even Shepard could tell. Just the way he said it, his voice still human in a way. This was stretching their strategy, risking everything for two transports. Talk about dedication to the mission.

"I have a ship, in orbit as we speak. The SSV _Normandy_. It can slip in and pull out the transports. We can meet up at thisâ€|Forerunner artifact."

Perplex turned into confusion. "Your Shipmaster of shipmasters called us here in the absence of your vessels."

"Look, I need to set something straight. I'm confused on who you think I am, but I was not part of the _Legend After_'s crew, nor was I sent by this shipmaster, Lord Hood. I was a part of something else, there isn't a lot of time, but I can bring the survivors back to theâ€| _Infinity_. My ship will have to enter your defensive perimeter; it's small, two-hundred-thirty-seven meters in length."

Soon enough, his subordinate holding the elongated rifle stood at his side. The commander turned to him then back to Shepard. "This ship, the _Normandy_? I have heard of such names in your navy's arsenal. If you insist, then retrieve your people. I shall questions your activities later, with your leaders."

Shepard's people? Was the crew of the _Legend After_ not one of their own?

"Arbiter! A Human ship is making its way through under the name of SSV _Normandy_. They're here to help escort the survivors back to their people." The commander said, through his comms, not even his hands to insert input of any sort.

This Arbiter's voice came through, a small echo on the commander's comm. Whoever's voice it was, sounded oddly familiar, as if Shepard heard it somewhere before, but he couldn't place it. "Hmm. We shall permit its passage. But tell these Humans to take heed, these abominations are stronger then we perceived. We cannot hold them off forever. Soon enough we will have to retreat and regroup with the _Infinity_."

"There you have it, Human. Call your ship, rescue your clan." With that, without any other word, he walked away.

Liara, possibly realizing what excite she's supposed to have, tried to stop him. But he either didn't here or didn't listen. So she asked a simpler question. "What do you mean his clan? The _Legend After _is not his ship."

Without even turning, he spoke. "I believe that we are both presented an enigma. Your companions... I can believer their ignorance, but yours, Reclaimer, is baffling. Go to the transports, all questions shall be answered."

A cope out if Shepard had to say. But maybe he just couldn't explain it all. Whatever the fuck was going on. The other aliens stopped their charge, slowly pulling back to the defenses of the militia base. The three Shepard saved passed him by, with one of the little guys stopping, looking up at him and saying "thank you".

Shepard stood there for a moment. This was the new contact? He didn't know what to expect, and now it seemed strange to think. They didn't seem to care for Shepard's needs, only for their crew, this _Infinity_, and Lord Hood. A name that sounded scarily human. Just like the name Mark Florence. But that was... that was impossible.

"Joker? The aliens will let you through. Pick us up at these coordinates and get us to those transports, ASAP. I don't even want to think what Cerberus will try to do." Shepard said through the comm.

There was also other impossible thoughts Shepard didn't even want to think about.

"Roger, Commander. Just fly past the funny looking ships, nothing horrifying at allâ€¦piece of cake."

â€¦

"New contact! This thing's about half the size of a _Paris_-class frigate, on direct intercept course. Traveling at five-hundred miles per hour, about thirty-two klicks out and closing, angles two, slow descent!" Tom yelled from the cockpit.

Jesus Christ.

Moving a UNSC frigate within a one-g atmosphere, at least using Human-made RCS technology, was extremely hard, and the fuel usage to station a UNSC ship for at least an hour is on equal to the amount of gas Humanity has used for the past fifty years combined (99 billion people with about twice that many cars. It's a lot.). But from the way Tom worded it, it almost made it sound like this ship was being used as a fighter.

They already had limited maneuver options with the wounded. With only fit naval personnel and marines, already used to the hell of G-force, Mark would've instantly get above the buildings and travel near Mach two with decent maneuvering on par with late twentieth century fighter jets.

But these men can't handle the stress. And there was no way in hell Captain Florence was even readying to begin to trust this 'Lieutenant Leng' after today's events. In fact, how was he speaking English? The

might have fast translators, it wasn't as if it were something new. The Huragok engineers of the old Covenant were able to process English Standard within a few minutes, gave it out to the Covenant soldiers seemingly to only taunt Humans as their homes were about to be glassed.

Something to this extent could've possibly happened. Leng, a Human name, Asian origin, might've just been one of the words found within the language. But that would mean they would have to recover some sort of UNSC technology, and the only possibility was the pod and the bodies Mark was forced to abandoned, or some captured soldier broke his/her oath to Humanity. It didn't matter. They would obtain nothing truly important in any event. The only people in the UNSC who knows the exact slipspace routes and coordinates of Earth are naval captains, admirals, and AIs. And they'll die before revealing anything.

"Contradiction, get Morgonson. Tell her to arm the HAVOK nukes. Last resort." Mark said. "Prepare to dump them."

"Roger, Captain. Getting her on the line. We can use them like mines just in case." He said through Lucy's helmet.

The Captain nodded, turning back to his comms. "This is Captain Mark Florence of the United Nations Navy. You said you have our men! How did you get them? Who? How many?"

Leng's shuttle strayed off, smart enough not to bait them. Leng's voice spoke through on the FM encryption. "Admittedly we were monitoring your communications when you entered the system. We rescued your crew before the Reapers, what you call "squids", could get to them. We have eleven survivors in our possession, and are continuing as we speak-

"You Will Not rescue any more of our people!-"

"Then we shall halt all operations. Captain Florence, I understand you have no reason to trust us after today's events, but we are not the Reapers'squids! We have a common enemy. We have medical supplies and doctors that can help your wounded."

"So you have an advanced medical understanding of our species, which according to you barely met."

Leng sounded slightly frustrated, maybe nervous. That was a good sign in Mark's mind, for whatever reason. Or maybe it wasn't, prone to violence more likely. "Listen, Captain. I can't explain, and if I were to try, you would never believe me. I have a proposal. You might perceive it as stupid, but if you were to follow my shuttle, I can bring you to a secured location with your men. I'll land. I'll be the only one, unarmed, to come out with your men. You can bring whoever, and whatever you like. You have my word. I'll explain everything, who I work for, this war, the Reapers. Whatever you want."

Mark wondered why they called the squids "Reapers". Sure, Mark guessed it would be a demon from God to see one of these monsters arrive from the clouds and unleash destruction. But still, it instantly reminded Mark of a squid. An, evil, terrifying, technologically advanced squid, but a squid nonetheless. Maybe they've never seen the animal species before.

"We have a frigate incoming. What about that?" Mark said.

"It's on my radar also. If you scan it, you'll find it isn't a Reaper. It's one of our enemies, and if it's guaranteed to be hostile to us, it is more likely to be hostile to you. Our transports are small, we can use them to maneuver from building to building and avoid the frigate."

Mark turned to Lucy. "Contradiction, what's your reading on the incoming ship?"

"Hard data radar came up, ah, it's defiantly not a squid design, as Lieutenant Leng said. Single, thin, elongated compartment, with a downward curved, upper hull design. Four rectangles acting as wings, connected near the back and pointing out longwise, two on each side. Five engines in total. Two aerodynamic rudders mounted at the back, on top of the main compartment, for atmospheric useâ€¦|hopefully.

"Its bottom hanger is opened, attached to the underside of the main compartment. I'm not sure why, but I'm picking up lifeforms, maybe about sixteen of them? Wait, standby, I'm getting an open FM transmission, point of origin from that frigate."

...

Slightly traveling under five-hundred miles per hour, wind pierced Commander Shepard's face. The cargo hatch opened and revealing the fast passing hills of Illium, about a kilometer below, tinted an electric blue from the hanger bay's shielding curtain. The shield took most of the brutal wind current. The city limits were approaching, first smaller buildings and homes. Heading towards the center of the city, spread out skyscrapers. Some nearly one kilometer in height.

Garrus, James, EDI, and Ashely, along with the _Normandy _security team made up of about eight people joined them on deck, secured somewhere on the bulkhead to battle the wind currents. Cortez was brought aboard by the militia when one of them driving the Mako realized he wasn't online. The shuttle pilot was immediately attended to by medics and Doctor Chakwas, moved to the infirmary under intensive care.

Chakwas was able to heal up most of it, yet didn't possess the right medical equipment. He would need an actual hospital. His injuries far worse than Shepard or the crew had expected. Internal bleeding. Organ trauma.

"I guess negotiations weren't the smoothest they've been." Garrus said, secured next to Shepard. "Or the landing either!"

"Something to that extent." Shepard yelled, almost forgetting he was right there. "But it's been going better than some others."

"I don't doubt it! I saw some of the snapshots of the aliens. What a lovely looking group of people. We couldn't just receive another race like the Asari, could we? Or even a human-like species would do."

Shepard only smiled at the joke. "At least it's better than the Turians."

EDI stood next to Shepard, robotic voice speaking. "Shepard, I've built up a FM frequency algorithm, similar to the one these UNSC people used. Switch to the channel I've set up on your communications. It should get a connection through to those transports. But there's another problem Shepard. These aliensâ€¦the large ones, are using a completely different encryption algorithm in no way similar to the _Legend After_. And from what we observed, obviously the transports of the _Legend After_ and this _Shadow of Intent_ are completely different."

"You're making them sound like two different species." Shepard said.

"I cannot say, and I have not seen enough evidence to prove or disprove your statement." The AI said.

"The _Shadow of Intent_ shipmaster blurred the lines. He made it sound likeâ€¦it wasn't he's species. He acted like he knew me, or at least my species. The alien didn't even care about Liara or Tali."

The two also joined them. Liara looked frightened, probably more confused and disoriented than Shepard. Tali, well, from what Shepard could tell, seemed anxious to say the least.

"Shepard, at this point they would have to be. These ships are nowhere near similar in any way. The _Shadow of Intent_ has no visible RCS engines, if any. Maybe you look similar to these species. I meanâ€¦Asari and humans look very similar." Tali voiced in a very hollow matter.

"Theorization won't get us anywhere at this point. There's only one way to find out. Switch to the channel." Liara said, stern and edging on anger in her usual approach.

Shepard nodded. He moved to communications, switched to the FM secure line, and a few moments later, a young and energetic voice played through.

"Hi! Hello! Fuck you, you are loitering in our air spaceâ€¦our personal space. Please reframe yourself immediately or I will contact the authorities-"

"Contradiction, get the hell off the line!" A slightly familiar accent ridden voice yelled. There was a small muffled sound, and it became clear. "This is Captain Florence of the United Nations Space Command _Legend After_. Identify yourself, or we will use deadly force!"

Shepard wondered what kind of 'force' they could use from two small transports against the _Normandy_.

"Shepard, I've also forgot to mention that I've detected large quantities of ionized uranium and hydrogen within the lagging transport. Nuclear bomb. Same type used in the _Legend After_." EDI said, opening up a screen on her orange visor

Oh.

They were willing to sacrifice their lives. Not only that, but take down almost everything with them. But Shepard didn't see that with the commander and his alien troops. Or... he did, actually. They threw themselves against the Reapers. The commander and his allies were more powerful, sure. But it was still stupid. It was worse than the Krogan. At least they cared about personal survival and the survival of their friends. These aliensâ€|on a whim are ready to die. Maybe if they saw a impossible threat, they went to the last resort... What were they protecting?

"I'm Commander Shepard of the SSV _Normandy_. Systems Alliance Navy Special Forces, Citadel Special Tactics and Reconnaissance. I don't want to fight you. My original orders were to safely make contact and help whatever way possible!"

"Shepard? Normandy..." The Captain said, almost as if they name were familiar, trailing off.

"I've already made contact with a commanding officer and his crew of the _Shadow of Intent_. Shipmaster Rtas' Vadum. He gave me direct permission to retrieve you and return you to the ship."

There was another halting moment of silence. Dreadfully long.

The _Normandy _was gaining closer and closer.

"We can manage to make it to the _Shadow of Intent _on our own, Commander." He said, almost sullen.

"Captain, it's a miracle so far you haven't been shot down by Reaper Hades Cannons, or Cerberus hasn't tried anything yet to bring you down!"

"Who?"

"That transport shuttle that's following you. It's part of an organization called Cerberusâ€| I can't tell you everything, but I can tell you that you shouldn't believe a word of what they say!"

â€|

Mark turned back toward the "Cerberus" shuttle, now in clear view through the buildings. A small, square transport with a curved front, painted white and a black strip on its portside. The Pelican can easily knock that thing down from the sky in an instant.

Both ships seem like they were of the unidentified xeno contacts. Why this distrust towards each other is beyond the Captain. His first decision was to cut loose and run straight towards the _Shadow of Intent _above. However, judging by the speed of the frigate, they'll catch them before they even made it to angels two.

This Commander Shepardâ€|he seemed fair too sincere for it to be true. It reminded him of Commander, now Captain Lasky, during those boring morale speeches on the _Infinity _in its first deployment. Lasky truly believed in what he was doing, a more sympathetic and optimistic output despite the manifestation of emotion and oddly near

nihilism in everyone from the War. Lasky was hopeful, loyal. And from mere, simple tone so did Shepard.

Mark wanted to believe in this Shepard. But he didn't want to risk running and all of the sudden triggering whoever into a two-faced bastard. A xeno, possibly adopting this time a western Human name for himself just to make it easier. Hopefully that was the reasoning.

Then there wasâ€| _Normandy_. The precursor battle that ended the fascist evil known as the Third Reich. A battle that loosely connected to the beginning of the United Nations. Where in God's name would they find that name? How did they know about a location on Earth?

Then there were the nukes. Mark wasn't ready to go down in a semi-heroic sacrifice. And it wasn't his choice to make alone, but that of nineteen others. To use the nukes now would require a far worse extent than this. Any other captain might have used to now to enforce Cole Protocol, but Mark had to know how Shepard knew about Earth.

Everything the UNSC stood for was at stake.

"Contradiction, connect both lines into one. We're going to have a forced negotiation." Mark said.

The AI did as told, optimizing both FM frequencies.

"Commander Shepard, Lieutenant Leng, here's my deal. I'm going to land my transports on a secured building top. Both of your ships, if possible, will land on the same building. Both of you will do as I say, and you will answer any and all questions I have, and we'll see where it goes. You will leave your weapons on your ships, and you will not kill each other. If there is any problem, I have a few nukes equaling about two-hundred megatons that I will use, and blow us all back to God. Do you understand?"

â€|

Thisâ€|wasn't unreasonable. Shepard had been in a few of these situations before, and he successfully negotiated through without any causalities. Captain Florence felt confident, little fear present... which was a good sign. A fearful group would be more prone to the illogical, Mark might listen to reason. Hopefully.

"Alright. I'll land my frigate. I'm going to come out with two of my crew members. Neither me nor my crew will be armed." Shepard said

He heard Kai Leng's voice on the other end. "My transport will land near yours. I'll come out alone, unarmed."

Of course it was him. Out of the dozens of Cerberus transport, his successfully got through. Honestly, it wasn't a surprise. A high level operation like this would require Cerberus's best to undertake it. Let's just hope he doesn't do anything stupid, like try to run a betrayal and bring out more shuttles or something and disable the nuke somehow. He always seemed to be a step ahead. Not this time though. Not against an atomic bomb.

"Well they seem very distrustful." Tali said.

"They entered a Relay only to be attacked. In the end, do you blame them?" Shepard said.

"Was I the only one who noticed the Captain was distraught when you said your name? Or mentioned the _Normandy_?" Liara said, removing her Carnifax, along with Tali, giving it to James and Ashley to carry.

"The whole situation seems a bit more than _distraught_. _We'll guard you from the _Normandy_, if they decide to try anything." Garrus said.

"I can't risk that. It may scare them. Once Tali, Liara, and I exit the ship, we're going to close the doors, reduce the chance of Captain Florence perceiving it as bringing armed force."

"Not what I would do, but it's your call, Shepard. Be careful."

He only nodded in response, removing weapons carefully. Hopefully, if this Captain Florence did try something according to Garrus, Liara's biotics and Shepard's and Tali's tech abilities will hold them long enough to fall back.

The _Normandy_ finally reached the two transports. Joker had to carefully move the ship through the skyscrapers, wings barely clipping the sides. Shepard could get a clear view of the ships. Tan transports, with four separate engines spanning as wings, two in the front and two in the back. One of them had an odd vehicle attached to the back. He realized it was a car with something strapped onto it. Like the old history vids of the twenty-first century. An actual car, not like the Mako or other ground transports.

Small RCS engines were located on the bottom hull, with metal landers at the end in the cargo hold. Overall, it looked ancient, bulky and ugly. A shared design trait to the _Legend After_.

The ships landed on top of a cleared out building, flat surface, no Reaper in sight. Joker hovered the ship's end of the hanger door at the edge of the building, letting Shepard's squad get on the roof.

He stepped through the shielding curtain into the cold air and the metallic smell of rain and asphalt. The grey and black world under the clouds and the high above purple demon known as the _Shadow of Intent_.

The roof under his feet, he heard the words of Captain Florence first before anything else.

"What the fuck?"

6. Earths

****Aboard UNSC ****_Infinity_****, bridge****

****Twenty kilometers and closing from God's Key****

****2557 Military Calendar, 10:34****

"This is UNSC AI Roland. Now here this! All essential personnel to action stations! Lock down all cargo under class B for immediate transit! We are moving in the breach, we are moving in the breach..."

As Roland stood on the _Infinity_'s massive holo-table, relaying orders throughout the entire ship, the battle alarm sounded on the bridge. Captain Lasky turned to the table, having a full tactical display of Battle Group Dakota. By all luck, there was still a lot of unknown to the Forerunner engines and slipspace systems Battle Group Dakota possessed. What should've been a few hours was only one. Admiral Alvares' fleet lagged far behind, but they're just going to have to proceed without her. Cole Protocol was far too important to wait.

"Shields up, backups on standby. All weapons armed and fighters prepped! Roland, get all ground teams on standby. Ready for immediate drop." Lasky ordered.

"Roger, roger all. Prep for sudden acceleration and gravitation."

The ship was near the artifact. The circles far slower than it was with the _Legend After_. _Here they go, into the breach. One of Humanity's greatest achievements leading the way.

The rings began to speed up as they got closer. Increasing past one-million revolutions per minute, threatening to run right through the _Infinity_ at that velocity.

"Stand by, unidentified matter surrounding ship, no contradiction with static-antimatter shields. All systems optimal. Massive gravitational depression, binary black holes at the center of the key rings. Dark energy destabilizing density and mass."

In no way this Key followed conventional astrophysics. The eggheads aboard the ship already concluded this attribute to dark energy and/or matter, how or why hasn't been delivered in a comprehensive report to Lasky.

"Density-mass flux! Negative G effect, hold on!" Roland yelled.

There were only shades of blue zipping past the _Infinity_. Lasky held on, feeling a sudden lightness to his entire body. Beside him, the bridge crew and the rest of the ship were secured at their station. Blue still passed, something similar to hyperspace in the ancient sci-fi films _Star Wars_. Black entrenched within, pressure against the Captain's chest. The other ships and the God's Key disappeared, light growing brighter.

Suddenly thrown back into the black void that became so familiar. Pressure thrown away, lungs able to expand properly. Stars thrown out of alignment, out of Lasky's knowledge of astro-navigation.

And farther off, a small sphere with green continents, seas, and fires and bright lights spread upon its surface. Red and blue flares surrounding and battling each other. A beautiful planet despite its

scars. The sun far behind it, windows darkening even more to counteract the light.

Everything the _Shadow Man_'s AI detected and reported was analyzed as fast as possible by Roland for tactical reports. Six planets in the entire system, only one habitable; Hostile xeno capabilities (whatever was seen) accounted for; indexed planet mass and density along with gravitational influence information. Everything they needed to jump into a blind deployment.

"Sir, all ships are accounted for, spread across a fifty-million kilometer radius. Immediate contact, Fleet of Retribution over planetary surface. They're getting the shit kicked out of them by the squids, but for the moment they're holding. Enemy contact, two-klick squids, dozens of them three-million kilometers out!"

There was a small tactical reading for the squid ships on the holo-table.

****Approved by the Office of Naval Intelligence. For eyes only:****

****Size: Two kilometers****

****Armament: Rapid fire spinal cannon, light. Possible anti-fighter cannons, possible anti-missile cannons, possible multiply Point Defense Cannons****

****Maneuver class: Class ten. Advise extreme caution in both outsourcing long-range combat situations and short-range combat. Maneuverability exceeds far past any UNSC ship.****

****Shielding: Most likely Dark energy based, light. Unknown plating, most likely light.****

****Manufacturer: Unknown Xeno****

There was a main group of squids, about half-a-million kilometers away from the Covenant geometrical defense circle. The squids grouped themselves together, directly on the same grid as the God's Key. Dozens of unidentified contact ships spread across the solar system, spread about in small skirmishes.

Lasky nodded, forming up the echelons of the battle group. Ten _Strident_-class ships dropped from the _Infinity_, rumbling as each one passed, realigning themselves with the face of the main ship. "Form up echelons tactical groups, ASAP. Planet is two-d northwards in our frame of direction; second and third echelon, move northwards by one-million kilometers, stride apart drift by five-thousand clicks, form up a kill box.

"Roland! Move the _Infinity_ westward, front facing northwards to coordinates five by seven by five by five. Macro-chaotic adjustments, diameter fifty clicks. Line up the MACs with nearest squid's intended trajectory. Fire two. All seventy millimeter guns begin to fire spread effect, get them to spread apart!"

Second and third echelon began to fill out orders. Each one was composed of twelve ships, led by four _Autumn_-class cruisers and one _Vindication_-class battleship. They began to reform quickly, moving

forward with each individual ship about fifteen-thousand kilometers apart.

From what HIGHCOM could analyze, not only were these squids highly outfitted for short-range warfare, but also for long-range. They were able to engage from tens of thousands of kilometers away. Chaotic movements were to counteract that, make them work for it. With Forerunner engines, the _Infinity_ didn't need any RCS engines or systems, able to decelerate, say, with the distribution of mass-density and kinetic momentum. Roland would randomly twitch the ship from place to place within a fifty klick circle faster than any ship in the UNSC Navy, mindful and controlling to not crash into other ships. And it looked and felt like nothing.

It worked; red and blackish lasers flew by, nearly missing the _Infinity_ and her ten guards. Lasky saw the squids were near the planet. They peeled away from orbit, despite all data pointing they should've moved along the gravitational orbit in order to break through it and not kill the crew.

This time the squids juttet off, turning towards echelons two and three, moving towards them at an increasing velocity in curved arcs.

"We're lined up! MAC one firing, MAC one firing!" Weapons Officer Watkins yelled off.

The ship vibrated, a flash of yellow light traveling forward, pushing the ship back. The eight-hundred ton slug moved forward. Lasky magnified on the blue-scope, seeing the squid bastard moving westwards only to be cleanly pierced mid-body by a slug that continued to travel towards the planet. Hope that didn't hit anything important down below.

Trails of light beads ignited from areas on the surface of the ship hull. Shell after shell of the eight-hundred-thirty guns flew forward, adjusted for intended trajectory at one percent speed of light at a target hundreds of thousands of kilometers away.

"Echelon one, move forwards, support two and three with a high curvature arc westwards. At aphelion of arc move all fronts to normal unit vector and engage any and all squids. Echelon four, cover echelon five," echelon five was mainly composed of the carriers and non-combatant ships, "launch all necessary support assets, fighters and drones. We need to get into position to launch off the ground troops. Get a horn with the _Shadow of Intent_, relay any and all tactical information."

"Roger, Captain. _Shadow of Intent_ is prepping all compartments for immediate slip from the planet's troposphere. Connecting line to the Arbiter, give me a moment."

Lasky had to deal with the sudden gravitation increase. Smaller breaths as with the standard naval technique. The ship curved upwards with her guards, moving towards the main squid group.

The _Strident_-classes engaged RCS engines, fires throughout the hull of the ships as they matched the _Infinity_'s movement. Archer missiles began to fire, small clusters with trails of smoke traveling towards the squids. From the blue scope, small pinpoint lasers downed

some of the missiles while others got through, either bouncing off shields or hitting their targets on the hull.

So they did have point-defense lasers. And Lasky guessed ONI would also be right about the anti-fighter systems. Fighter deployments in this kind of fight wouldn't do any good either, serving only as payload carriers and sabotage units. And from the structural reports, these squids can take a beating and can still be fully combat operational.

"MAC two away, MAC two away!" Watkins called off.

Again, another burst of yellow light that rocked back the ship. The other guards followed the assault, slugs away in the usual fashion of UNSC long-range tactics. The squids were moving now to avoid, some of the slugs missing by only meters with a few hitting their targets. A one-hundred-sixty meter squid was completely engulfed and disappeared under the yellow sun.

Third and second echelon moved in, their commanders readying them for fast-strike movements, with third echelon's trajectory suggesting a slingshot around the nearby gas giant. That would direct them right through the squid group.

"Sir, new contacts closing in. Squid group, flight of twenty-five, moving into the system from the distant gas giant, velocityâ€|this, this can't be right." Roland said, opening up a new screen.

"What's wrong?"

"They're traveling Faster Than Lightâ€|that... The energy required has to be anything beyond this universe can provide. Massâ€| negative seven. Stress-energy tensor has to be larger than the object."

Breaking the laws of Relativity. Lasky didn't need an explanation toâ€| well actually he did, but that would have to wait. Roland can read everything, send it to the eggheads, have them panic witnessing the foundations of the universe crumble before their own eyes. It wasn't a first. The Ring's found a way around that, using some sort of tachyon particle as their weapon, traveling across tens of thousands of light years in mere minutes of what should've taken millenniums in conventional space. However the UNSC didn't exactly get a perfect look.

The squids' foundation can take hell from gravitation, but if they can maneuver at FTL then the UNSC already lost.

"Are they decelerating?" Lasky said.

"Yes, sir, lowering velocity to sub-light. I've detected almost a gravitational hill in the space-time curvature, and at the speed they're going at their _depression_ should be larger than damn Canis Majoris."

"Space-time hill? Thatâ€|"

"Believe me, I'm slightly less lost than you. Squid group is using gas giant's gravitational influence to sling shot a vector towards third echelon. ETA: two minutes until firing range."

Back to the situation. The twenty-five squids were spread about one-thousand kilometers apart. Not very smart in terms of space combat. It was too easy to surround them or affect a ship with splash damage. Third echelon turned their _Paris_-class frigates towards the enemy. They moved away from the main group. The squid's trajectory was arced, so the frigates' commander did an inverse arc, hoping the squids would pass them, and the frigates can circle around to open fire with the MACs.

Lasky saw the velocity decrease. At this rate the frigates might be able to take them out, but with what the squids had shown so far, they might be able to face them. The squids will just peel off units to deal with the seven ships, how many is unknown, but at the most it had to be half.

Third echelon might be able to take them out, but the risks weren't worth it.

"Roland, call back subgroup of third echelon. Depress their trajectory and switch their inverses, use habitable planet and shoot them upwards. Slingshot towards first echelon. We'll regroup."

"Aye, aye, sir. Calling back subgroup."

Orders filled out as evident on the holo-table. Lasky turned third echelon towards the squids, lining up the shots and opening firing. The squids micro-adjusted, moving upwards and downwards at long-distant trajectory movement.

"Captain. I'm picking up dozens of concentrated gravitational depression connections, not wavelengths. They're trying to establish a base, use it for a systematic cybernetic attack." Roland reported.

"Can you stop it?"

"For the moment. The more we stay here, Captain, the more they'll learn our systems. Firewalls are up, but we're just going to have to wait and see."

"Also!" Roland added, always enthusiastic. "Horns up with the Arbiter."

"I'll make it quick." For the moment, Roland can fill out all tactical details. Lasky had to organize the ground assault. You learn to make these quick calls under combat.

The Arbiter's hologram appeared on the table. Dressed in far more ceremonial armor than the average Elite. Black and dark golden plates engraved with traditional art of their species. Lasky got to meet him a few times before, with Lord Hood. Every time it was an honor.

"Captain Lasky, we have retrieved a good portion of your people yet we have run into some difficulties with opposing AA canons on the hillside and outskirts of the city. The _Shadow of Intent_ and her fleet has already taken enough abuse and we can last no longer."

Lasky nodded, voice filled with a regrettable haste as the ship still moved forward. "I understand, Arbiter. I'm going to have to make this quick, but you have done a great service to the United Nations and Humanity. We'll regroup if possible. We'll honor your sacrifices."

"Indeed. Our ship is ready to move out. I understand that you are to deploy warriors to the surface. I shall relieve some ground troops to your command, and hopefully you can regroup with them. I also received a report from your shipmaster, an old friend is to deploy with the first wave on the surface. It shall be good to see him again. I told you it was far too easy for him to merely die like this, yet your superiors idiotically ignored me."

"That you did. You've done more than enough, Arbiter. Stand by, moving into position." Lasky cut the line, turning to Roland. "What can you tell about the surface."

Roland stepped aside and displayed a three-dimensional topography map and outline of the city. Constant rolling hills, a lake with city encroaching on it. The buildings were spread apart, and clustered at the center, like any other normal human city. Buildings lined up along the lake, no shore-side front property.

"I've located the pods the Elites missedâ€¦ Most are spread around the countryside. Where the _Legend After _should be is just a controlled pile of radioactive rubble. I have detected two transports in the city, butâ€¦"

"But?" Lasky asked.

"Frigate-sized ship is gaining on them. Unidentified contacts, different design but similar foundational structure. I think they've made contact."

The map displayed the pods as red dots. From the looks of it, the Elites barely made a dent in the rescue population. There were still dozens. And either way wouldn't it be sounder to hover over a concentrated area of pods then a possibly contested city? What were they doing?

"We have to hurry. What about squid and contact projections?"

"The Elites eliminated most of the AA that contradicted with their positioning. But from what I can tell, there're still a lot of them. They most likely have a cone shape firing position, can't even maneuver and shoot anything at their height level, but can target anything the higher you go. And judging from the Elite fleet, I don't think these cannons target at exosphere, but I don't know their firing capacity or impact yield." Roland said

"I understand. Get Palmer and Buck from Spartan CIC. Get them on the line. Continue to move the _Infinity_ in a full arc, micro-direct trajectory over the city, underside hull facing the surface and launch the ODSTs."

"Roger, sir. But from calculated trajectory, we'll have launch from a curved vector in order to match the planet's gravitational influence and spin. It'll be forty-seven thousand kilometers. Way above optimal launch distance."

Before Lasky could answer, Roland stepped aside. Colonel Buck and Commander Palmer appeared. Buck was fully dressed in the black armor of the ODS'Ts and Palmer within the red and white Spartan commander armor. Both of them saluted the Captain.

"Sir." Buck said. "We're prepared for drop. Just waiting on your orders."

"My Spartans are prepped and waiting for the doors to open." Palmer added. "We also got the Master Chief into a modified pod. He's locked and loaded."

"Good. Ladies, the _Infinity _will be moving, adjust accordingly. It'll be around fifty-thousand klicks. Think you'll be able to handle it?"

"Defiantly. We've been well trained for high-orbit drops. But I can't say for the Spartansâ€¦" Buck said.

"Believe me, we can handle it better than the you."

"Good." Lasky said. "Your first targets are the AA cannons, we need that foot hold; watch out for E-band transmissions for any pods. If they're in trouble, they turn into immediate priority. I will _not _deploy you into that city. We have no idea what's down there."

"Thank you, sir. I hate urban drops, anyways." Buck said.

"Copy that. However we've picked up multiple cannons near the city, and we also have two UNSC Pelicans deep inside the city. Palmer, your Spartans will deploy to these locations. Buck, your 'elite' brigade will take on the AA cannons where, topography surveys suggest, serve as the best location to deploy firebase footholds. You'll get support from the Master Chief and whatever Spartans Palmer is willing to spare. Take out the targets, link up with pod survivors.

"You will receive no armored or marine support, and limited orbital and air support, _if any_. Once you eliminate those AA cannons I'll send down the invasion ASAP. From there, you'll get the support you need to head through the city and hopefully link up with those transports."

Both acknowledged, saying they understood despite the shot into the partial-unknown, but the Elites would only smash through, no survey at all.

"Get to your pods. God be with you. Lasky out."

****On top of building, 2187 Citadel Calendar, 10:36****

The rifle pointed at Shepard and his crew was about a little over three feet in length. Dark grey and black with a double orange strip at the end of the forestock. A small gap in the upper hand guard that connected to a large carrying handle with a square scope at the back end. No evidence it can fold into a weapon block. The person holding it was maybe a little shorter than Shepard, standing at five-eleven, dressed in grey body armor, shoulder guards, and jutted neck guard on his left shoulder, covering a black uniform. Ranking was shown on his

collar and shoulder guards. The exact insignia of captain used in the Alliance Navy.

Four other people joined him. Two were dressed in blue armor, with black underlays that dressed a body abnormally muscular. Armor pieces spread apart, scratched and seeing its share of war. One stood at around six-four, helmet with a large oval-shaped yellow visor. The other was short, only at around five-one. A squared shape helmet with a smaller visor. The tall one held a large silver rifle, with a curved upper guard and attached hand grip. The short one was most defiantly what Shepard can describe as a double barrel rocket launcher.

The other two had armor similar to the captain. Except it was white, far less advanced then the blue armored units. Green, Kevlar-like or possibly dragon skin body armor with a single metal shielding covering their chest. White markings on arms and leggings. They looked like the soldiers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Some body parts only covered by mere cloth.

Black hair, brown eyesâ€|human skinâ€|

Everything with what the Shipmaster saidâ€|, this isâ€|

"Who the fuck are you?" He yelled. He didn't see a response, Liara and Tali shocked as much as Shepard. All three held their hands up, surrendering.

Shepard didn't even notice Kai Leng was across from the group. Standing in front of his shuttle, wearing the usually black specialist fatigues, and the Cerberus seal. From the looks of it, he didn't even bring his Japanese ninjato-styled swords. The Illusive Man must really want this. The white and black visor glasses blocking any shock, if any.

"Captain, I understand your shock of-" Kai Leng began.

"I asked you a damn question! Who the hell are you?" He said. Their rifles pointed from Kai Leng back to Shepard and his crew. Prominently, they were aiming at Liara and Tali. "You're fucking Naval Intelligence, aren't you? You sent in Spartan-IIIs, you knew what was on the other side, didn't you?"

At those words, the two blue armored units and a white armored eyed him, almost suspiciously. Maybe they were confused as Shepard was.

"What the hell are you talking about? Naval Intelligence? I already told you, I was sent here by the Systems Alliance Navy!"

The Captain seemed scared, almost frightened. "Commander, I know ONI has a lot of shady shit, but I never heard of the Systems Alliance. And I can defiantly tell you there is no Human navy outside the UNSC Navy!"

A Human captain, crew, aboard an alien ship. Mark Florence claiming of the UNSC. If there were slight differences, such as the similarities between Asari and Human physiology, then it wasn't visible, possibly into genetic coding. But to see a complete similarity in the chaos that is evolution, wasâ€|had to be

impossible.

"Captain, I have never heard of the UNSC, Naval Intelligence, or the _Legend After _until a few hours ago!" Shepard was only able to say.

"Maybe you can answer some of our questions, such as who are _you_!" Liara said. She cautiously stepped forward, prompting him to reshoulder his rifle.

If it hit Shepard bad, then Liara was far worse. Eyes widened, the mask of something similar when she first saw Shepard alive. Except there was absolutely no associated emotions with meeting someone you want to meet. Contact with actual aliens was one thing. New contact with a species you already metâ€¦

"Commander, you have made contact with unidentified xenos. You are aboard their goddamn ship. This is beyond the shit ONI does; you have broken First Contact Protocol.

"And you!" Mark said, as if Liara didn't say anything, moving his weapon to Kai Leng. "Why didn't you say you were UNSC? Hell, even ONI! We would've regrouped. Get the hell out of this mess and send up a threat assessment to FLEETCOM!"

Was he not listening to Shepard?

"Captain, I don't think they're UNSC or ONI personnel. I'm not picking up any IFF tags or anything that can remotely pin them to the UNSC." The energetic voice on the comms said. Its origin was from the short armored blue figure, an oddly male voice from a feminine figure.

"Listen to him. Neither meâ€¦nor Kai Leng have any idea on what you're talking about." Shepard said.

The Captain stayed silent for a moment, looking to Kai Leng and Shepard. "I want details. Who sent you, what you're doing. M.O.S. Military training. Where you were born, a little about yourselves. And your friends." He aimed at Liara and Tali. "Who exactly are they?"

"Like I said earlier, I'm Lieutenant Kai Leng." He said. Shepard noticed he didn't have his hands raised. "I was born on here, on Illium." There were barely any humans here, and there defiantly wasn't enough timespan for one to be born on this planet. "I was trained as a sabotage specialist and special operations commander by an organization called Cerberus. I was sent by the head of this organization, codenamed the Illusive Man to rescue you and return you to your people in order to establish peaceful relationships to help fight and defend from the Reapers.

"As I was saying earlier, I understand your shock. Like Shepard said, I have never heard of ONI, and I can assure you that Cerberus is not part of ONI or the UNSC."

"So what you're saying is Cerberus is a part of the rebels?"

"Captain, I'm saying we have never made contact."

He looked to Shepard, moving his weapon towards him. "What about you?"

"I'm part of the Systems Alliance Navy and represent the Citadel Council, a collation of numerous species. I was trained as a sniper infiltration specialist and received N7 advanced combat and command training on Earth. I was born on the human colony of Mindoir. I signed up with the Alliance Navy after it was attacked by raiders and have been serving for fifteen-thirteen years. I was sent here by Fleet Admiral Steven Hackett to fill out the same objective as Kai Leng. To retrieve any and all survivors and help you back to your people."

"EarthEarth? You mentioned Earth. Both of you claimed you never heard of the UNSC or ONI, but how the hell do you know about Earth? How the hell are you Human?" Mark said, frantic.

"Do they know?" He said, trailing off.

"Who? Know what?" Shepard said.

"Them." He pointed at Liara and Tali, remaining quiet. "Do they know about Earth? Do they know its location?"

That was the oddest question to come out of the Captain's mouth. Of course they knew about Earth. Its location wasn't a secret.

"Before we even answer that question" Liara started. "I can tell that -whatever Earth we're talking about- it is important to you And I am afraid what kind of a reaction you'll have if we respond."

"Sir" The energetic voice said. "I've looked through all eight-hundred coloniesThere's no such colony called Mindoir. Unless the Rebels established a colony, but that would almost be impossible. Whatever ships they have are only a few suicide cargo vessels, and in no way can handle deep space exploration. And of course we have no record of this world, Illium. Leng was born hereAnd this planet was obviously contacted by the Forerunners."

Forerunners. God's Key. Shepard had to assume at this point what they were talking about were the Protheans. Why then would the Protheans move these people wherever? How come they're so much like Shepard? Insignias, letters. And eight-hundred colonies?

Eight-hundred colonies?

"I'mI'm sorryhow many colonies didhe say?" Tali, partially relaying Shepard's thoughts.

"That brings it back to my original question" Mark said. "Who the hell are you?"

Shepard swore he saw his finger entrench slightly on the trigger.

"I'm Doctor Liara T'Soni. Archeologist and communications analysis." Well, thank God she didn't say "shadow" and "broker". "I am an Asari,

one of the alien species to make contact withâ€¦humanity."

"Tali'Zorah nar Rayya vas Normandy." Tali said. "I'm a Qurian. Eezo electrical engineer and ship machinist specialist."

"Tali'Zo-â€¦.right." Mark said, not even beginning to pronounce the Qurian's name. "I'll assume from your response that you do know where Earth is?"

Liara only response was a small nod. A gesture of retained fear.

"The UNSC? Shepard, Leng, you look older than five years old. Were you not there during the War? At least. When _that ship_." Mark said, quickly pointing up the _Shadow of Intent_ above. "And all those like it were glassing our homes and killing us in the billions?"

When he said _it_, he moved his hand to Liara. _It_? In the classical racism humanity first presented after first contact again present. Liara continued, pretending not to be phased by the words, the racism at least. "â€¦Yes. We do know where Earth isâ€¦"

"Shepard, Kai Leng, it is impossible that you're Human, and do not know _anything_ about the UNSC. And Earth, they fucking know!" He aimed the rifle now, stepping closer as did his crew. The green armored turned on Kai Leng while the blue armored backed up the Captain.

"Everyone knows where Earth is!" Shepard exclaimed. He backed up towards the ship. Let's hope Joker can open up those doors quickly. "When the Turians made contact thirty years ago, they did attack-"

"Turians?" Mark said. "The Elites?"

"Who are they?"

"The bastards you said you meet. The Shipmaster of the _Shadow of Intent_."

"Those aren't the Turians!" Shepard said. "They're nothing like the Turians. I'm talking about a completely different species!"

Mark was silent for a moment, turning to one of the soldiers. "Contradiction. What the hell is going on?"

What was contradicting?

"Cap, Iâ€¦I... They don't seem to be lying. From tech scans, both these dudes have a lot of minor gravitational fluxes within that armor, same with the weapons. Some sort of gravitational disturbance surrounding their bodies. It's a shield, a lot different from the static-antimatter we have aboard our ships, and a lot different from Spartans and the light stuff on the ODSs.

"This stuff is the same tech in both the contact and squid ships. As for all the stuff they said, Cerberus, Citadel Council, Illium, Mindoir, Systems Alliance. There is nothing within my databases.

Hell, there's no M.O.S within the UNSC called _sniper infiltration specialist_. Wh..what? Literally the stupidest name you can name something."

"Stick to the point."

"Asari, Qurian. No such thing, no information. Nothing. And if there was something in the Forerunner databanks, it would take years to comb out. Absolutely nothingâ€|" The voice trailed off.

"What the hell could be wrong now?" Mark said, looking to the soldier.

"New radio contacts. UNSC frequencyâ€|.connecting to enforcement."

There was a short static sound, followed by a young voice, energetic and enthusiastic in a similar way to this Contradiction. It was played on EDI's homemade comms.

"This is Captain Thomas Lasky of the United Nations Space Command _Infinity_ to all stranded UNSC assets, standby for immediate rendezvous with UNSC forces."

Infinity. _Shepard received a contacted line himself from EDI.

"Shepard, another set of contacts came through the Relay. About fifty-eight ships, ranging from five-hundred meters to five kilometers in length. Each design has the same foundational and architecture structure as the UNSC _Legend After_. All of them with the base wording-foundation 'UNSC'."

Fifty-eight ships... Combined with the eleven ships already present, would make the fleet larger than both the Turian and Asari navies combined, breaking pretty much the entirety of the sacred Citadel Conventions.

And the UNSCâ€|were they all like him? Human?

Shepard turned from the group, even with the threat of weapons. "Can you lock in on a specific ship? UNSC _Infinity_?"

"Easily. It's the largest of the battle group, standing at around five-point-six kilometers in length, eight-hundred-thirty-four meters in width, and a little over a kilometer in height. Their energy output is near to that of a Mass Relay.

"It looks like the ship is currently moving perpendicular about a kilometer outside the city, fifty-thousand-klicks above. Stand by, I'm detecting an opening within the under hull of the ship."

â€|

"Let's go goddamn it! We are REDCON One! Fill your pods, Feet First into Hell!"

"Hoorah!" The crowded voices of the ODSTs responded.

Dark black and grey armor of the 19th Been crowding the thin launch decks, metal rattled and threaten to break as men and women marched to their pods, stepping out of the mesh to line up along the edge of the deck, facing their pods.

Nobody was talking. It was almost a tradition right before drop. Sullenness and fear running through the minds of everyone on what the hell is below. Despite the stories of the elite Shock Troopers, they felt nearly the same way as regular conventional UNSC forces. They weren't Spartans; they weren't mentally ready to jump into the Hell, even with the experience all of them held. It never seemed to help

Lieutenant Dubbo cut out of line, reporting to his pod. He was near the end, where the trajectory was far enough to land near their target position. The empty cold shell that most ODSTs saw as a coffin instead of a steel and titanium cocoon. He placed in his MA5D and kept his M6 Magnum. While he never had a pod malfunction, there was always dozens of stories of pods being ripped apart in low atmosphere.

The mesh soon cleared out, everyone standing at their pods. The Colonel himself, with Lieutenant 'Rookie' came down the line. He opened up the back of the bucket, tapping in a code and smacking on the cover.

The Colonel reached Dubbo, quickly inserting in numbers and hitting the back of the bucket. Orange lines began to surround objects, radar and weapons display, and shield status filled up his view with the activation of the HUD.

Dubbo stepped into his pod, one foot at a time, strapping himself into the seat. The others did the same. The reinforced casing closed, a sudden snap and the increase of pressure as the pod stabilized.

His pod moved away from the deck, rocking back and forth like a rollercoaster going up a hill before it launched down. The curvature of the planet and the glare of thermosphere in the opening down below. Small bits of space and stars further out.

"Alright, ladies, good ends, high lows, ready up, here we go! Feet First into Hell!" Colonel Buck said, on a small monitor on the right side of the pod's interface.

The pods stayed in lock position, threatening to stay and place and crash against the deck with the _Infinity_'s movement. One by one, in bursts of blue lights pods raced to the surface. Dubbo's pod rumbled at every launch.

It was finally his turn. And with zero notice, the RCS systems within the upper capsule opened up, quickly pushing his pod away from the _Infinity_. The pod creaking and moaning, nearing its maximum pressure limit. The horrid feelings of contradicting forces threaten to tear Dubbo from his seat and lift him into the air. The particular trajectory smashing Dubbo into the seat with excoriating force. A chest barely able to expand as he had to use breathing techniques that an observer would see as hyperventilation.

Above, the _Infinity _continued to move like a dart, soon

disappearing. Other pods in the distance followed Dubbo's, the farther the go out becoming more like little beads in space. The same could be said for below, beads until they disappeared in blue and green.

UNSC _Autumn_-class cruisers engaged squid hostiles. The bastard squids trying to edge closer and closer, lasers and Archer missiles combating. A two-klick squid pass them by, only half-a-kilometer out, its movement twisting the pods and throwing them off course.

Dubbo could barely turn his head without immense strain, but somehow Colonel Buck was able to speak in full sentences. Probably a skill gained from his massive amount of experience.

"Colonel Buck to UNSC AI Roland, requesting new trajectory formula for incalculable gravitational influence, how copy?"

"_Infinity _actual, copy all, I see the vector offset. Assuming direct control. Readjustmentâ€¦inâ€¦.three, two, one, now!"

The RCS system twisted eastwards, placing the pods back onto course.

"Rightâ€¦" Colonel Buck began. "No contradicting trajectories, thirty-five k klicks minus. Dubbo, Mickey, Dutch, Romeo, Rookie, remember your jobs. Palmer's sending over a couple big boys. You'll like what they got."

Another face appeared on screen. Spartan Commander Palmer, dressed in her gear, face blocked.

"We have to spread out more, dozens of squid one-sixty meters on surface."

"Oh, so the "almighty" Spartan-IVs can't take it head on?"

"Not without a MAC or a few Cobras. Christ, they're forming around the main AA cannons, Buck your squ-" Her video cut.

A dash of blue light, fast moving, completely engulfing a distant pod and moving forward without so much as being phased.

Commander Palmer's video came back online. "Evade! Evade!"

More blue streams of light followed, some barely missing and others hitting their target with pinpoint accuracy far beyond any UNSC defense cannon, even one commanded by an AI only slowed by mechanical slowness.

"Those are the AA! Micro-adjustments! This is why we're here boys, lock 'em on, lock 'em on!" Buck yelled.

â€¦

Defiantly notâ€¦Human. One had a feminine body, covered by something that looked similar to some of the gear the eggheads wear, covered in all by a lab coat. Very similar combat armor as a base, cutting off at joints, overlaying possibly a grey combat dress uniform. It was white edged with blue cloth that covered her mid and lower body and legs, differenced with dark white fabric and grey textures covering

her forearms, shoulders, and breasts. Bright blue straps surrounded the body, connecting the lab coat to the gear, one strap above her hips, another mid-body and the last embedding around its collar bone. A collar, covered by the same type of strap, leading to a frightening human-like head.

Human feminine cheek bones, facial structure and features, slightly upturned nose, everything. Freckles under her eyes and pattering its noseâ€¦ Just, blue. Blue skin-tone, darker blue eyes, even darker blue lips. Where there should've been hair was replaced by some sort of formed lighter blue tentacles starting at where ears should've been. Each one connected to the head, speckled with some kind of glittering skin. The tentacles themselves depressed curved, ending together at a single point. At the back of her neck, was some sort of vain-like natural tubing that raised up and faded out to her tentacles.

The other one also had a feminine figure. Petite body and arms, with larger hips (talk about child-baring hips) and legs. Didactyl legs, toes pointed sharply to something like a bird perhaps, and tridactyl arms. Her body, including face was completely covered by armor.

Black suit base at arms, legs, and mid and upper body, interrupted by grey metal materials, yellow metal plates covering at the collar bone and neck. The most notable part of her gear was the embroidered purple cloth covering her hips and thighs like a skirt, and another similar fabric covering her shoulders, neck and head. The pattern designs looked like white cartooned wind currents, oddly nicely going along with the fabric. It was something similar to an Islamic hijab. Two large buttons connected the purple shroud. And what should've been a face was covered by a laminated, curved purple mask. A metal circle near the mouth of the mask surrounded by two plates on each side, forming a breathing point. Two bright, evenly separated white lights represented eyes.

And the one separated from the three, part of this 'Cerberus'. Long black hair, centralized plate armor and single chest plate with an orange hexagon, spaced out in its lengthwise center and the shape surrounded by two black lines outlining. A pair of visor goggles and other facial protection, voiding most of the emotions he gave off, pale skin and mouth only visible. The goggles had blue slits forming intimidating eyes, hatred only within them.

Muscle mold build surrounding his thighs and forearms. Black upraised metal protections and outgoing skirt-like rear protection. Yellow tipped gloves with some serious hardware tech going on.

And the one so different from the others altogether. Gliding dark black and red armor. Small circles surrounded by an outlining dark red circle, about six or eight on his chest plate, even number on each side. A single large red strip traveling down his right arm, outlined by white lining, cutting off at joint movement points. Advanced armor, fitted to his body, greater than anything the marines, Army, or ODSTs possessed. The insignia N7 over his upper right lung. Despite this, it obviously seen its fair share of war. Scratched up and dented in several places. No facial protection of any sorts.

The wearer also saw his fair share. A man within his late twenties,

had black crew-cut hair, five o'clock shadow, thicker near his mouth. Rough facial complexion, and darkened caucasian skin. Dark circles beginning to grow under his deep blue eyes. A single scar traveling at the edge of the forehead, cutting through his hair and fading near the top of his head.

Tiredness, so evident. That's all that stood out on his face, maybe hiding a mask of fear.

Humansâ€|

All in all, flawless English, American accents, even from the xenos. And if Mark and his men showed any sign of shock, there's was only worse. Except for this Kai Leng, showing only an anger that was probably usual for him with his visor gear.

And they claimed they didn't know ONI or the UNSC. That's where Mark's mind went to, Humans aboard unknown ships. Maybe some experimental build within ONI's prowler corps. But everything they said, with such conviction, that they know. And with Contradiction's wordsâ€|

Before anyone else could speak, before more dialogues of utter confusion, a loud boom spread across the entire city. Mark could feel the vibrations as the metal did its best to hold together. Further out, a few buildings began to collapsed, flying down to the surface.

Sparks of blue light from the _Shadow of Intent_'s engines, pushing the ship forward towards the _Legend After _crash site. It lifted its pitch axis, ascending curved trajectory, front rising towards the skies as the ship pushed itself away from the city.

Mark lifted his arm to protect his face, dust flew by, transports and this _Normandy _tilted, rebalancing themselves and readjusting back into original position. The Elite ship soon began to disappear behind the rain clouds.

The _Normandy_'s front covered a decent portion of the building. Blue strips and the word _Normandy _on it...obviously. The ship floated perfectly, no RCS. Nearly no sounds or thrown dust.

Blue streams began to ignite throughout the city and hillside, followed by echoed discharge sounds. Some of them seemed to follow the _Shadow of Intent_, but other than that, the streams spread throughout the skies.

"The Elites are bugging out!" Mark yelled to Contradiction, sonic overlay from the ship still heard.

"No, sir! Making room. _Infinity _made a perpendicular orbital pass. ODS'T pods are in route, ETA: eight to nine minutes. Lasky is being hounded by incoming squid two-k ships, moving towards an arc using the planet's orbit."

Land-grab. A usual tactic, ODS'Ts deploy, secure, make way for the marines and firebases. However, why the hell were they trying to establish secure points? If Mark knew the current UNSC, they would just grab everything that was theirs, move back into the God's Key only to be never heard or seen from again by these squids or xenos.

Then the UNSC would plan and build defenses based off all information gathered on these bastards.

"_Infinity_? The Shipmaster said he was going to deliver your crew there." Shepard said.

He tried to inch forward, slight movement of the foot.

Mark shouldered the Battle Rifle. "Shepard, Leng, whatever you think you are, whatever _I _think you are, you are Human. Can we agree on that?"

"Yeah."

"Yes."

"Then by that, you are under the direct authority of the United Nations. And already, Shepard, you have broken Cole Protocol."

"And what would that even mean?" Shepard said.

"Usually it means that I would shoot you and your friends, and trigger the nuke inside your ship. But for the moment, it can mean I am defiantly not getting on either one of your ships."

"Captain Florence," Kai Leng began. "I know you won't believe me, but if Reaper ships are in the proximity they will detect you and shoot you down if the Reaper Hades Cannons don't.

"Captain, my job is to get you safely back to the _Infinity_. I can do that, and I promise you that-"

"_We_ do not trust you enough, Lieutenant Leng. We have wounded. Shepard? You said you can help them?"

"Yeah. I have aid, and can help stabilize your troops." Shepard said.

He stepped forward again, slowly, followed by his blue companion. Two sets of hands were up, pacing. Everyone still had their rifles aimed.

"Our men are critical and we don't have enough time." Florence said. "Go ahead, see if you can help. Try anything though and I _will _put you down. Banks, tell them to take out the critically wounded. We'll see what they do."

Banks and the marine sprinted back towards the Pelican, carefully bringing out a stretcher with the injured kid. They brought him forth to the Captain.

It was the blue xeno who walked first, with Shepard closely behind. The xeno was maybe about five-six or five-seven. She opened up some sort of orange light that surrounded her arm, strips and orange circles in a single connected pad.

Mark stepped back, weapon still aimed. She simple waved her arm over the wound. Nothing seemed to happen at first, but then small portions of the inner wound began to close up, pools of blood dried and began to pour back in. Small, minor stuffâ€¦

"What the hell is that?" Mark asked.

"Omni-tool, medi-gel. It uses a mixture of salve and ultra-sound. It heals most wounds and stabilizes critical." She said. "It works across all species, including human."

"Can you tell me what he got hit by?"

"Eezo rounds. Eezo is a subatomic particles, from dark energy." She said.

"Dark energy-based weapons? Some neutrino formed base maybe?"

"Not quiteâ€¦|He should be fine for now, but he does need ER attention soon. I have more, you can bring out-"

"New contact! New contact! Inbound!" Contradiction suddenly said. Lucy immediately jumped down into a fighting position, along with Tom.

"Commander, I've got two enemies on radar. Reaper interceptors closing in!" Someone said on Shepard's comms, audible to the Captain.

Just fucking convenient.

At first it was still the rush of wind, but then Mark heard the declaration boom from supersonic.

"Contradiction, tell Morganson to secure the wounded, now!"

Something moved from behind the buildings. Two small cylinders with extended antennas sticking at the front and two parallel sticking out. Giant red eyes characterized the front of the fighter. They seem to float instead of fly, moving in random patterns without any resistance from air. Extremely robotic in design, far from the squid ships.

"Move!" Shepard yelled.

He ducked down, sprinted towards his ship along with his crew.

The eye fighters swooped down, running across the building roof. Smaller versions of the squid two-k cannon, making an electronic discharge sound. Lucy and Tom aimed their weapons, firing off round after round. Lucy popped up a rocket, slapping the other eye fighter and sending him straight towards a nearby building.

The beam reached the end of Mark's Pelican, completely slashing right through it. For a brief moment, the transport remained still, and then caught fire, barely held in one half as the metals began to melt.

â€¦|

Shepard did a double take, turning around and sprinted towards the burning ugly transport without really thinking.

Captain Florence, the male blue armored soldier, and (scarily) Kai Leng joined him, caring little now for their previous hostilities.

The _Normandy _cargo door opened up, pouring out the entire ground deployment crew and security team under Shepard. Gunfire mixed through the air, aimed at the Reaper fighter. Near the edge of the building, Husks began to appear from their slow climb.

It was the blue soldier who sprinted faster than any human should be able to, reaching the closed door. He gripped the door at cuts within the metal, ripping it apart with bare hands. He soon enough gripped one side, tearing away the metals until he made a big enough hole to get through.

"Grab the wounded, let's go!" Mark ordered, now holding some sort of small black weapon with the grey rifle slung over his back, no formation into a weapon block.

Mark was the first to step in, no protection against the fire and smoke. Shepard was next, a wide cargo hanger inside with seats lined up on each end. Debris scattered all over the place, on top of three wounded. One body was nearly cut open, directly in the path of the fighter beam. Caked blood spread across the floor. The other dead was caught in the fire, blackened skin and burning gear. Hopefully his death wasn't painful

Mark grabbed one of the survivors, picking him up despite the protests of screams. He moved to the door, pushing past Leng and Shepard. Shepard grabbed another, a small soldier, pale skin and dressed in blue fatigues of some sort. Shepard lifted him onto his feet, feeling physical resistance.

The Commander reached the hole, kept open by the blue soldier. Kai Leng followed close behind, also carry a wounded man.

The Commander stepped out into the building. Garrus and James aimed towards the other transport, firing at incoming Husks coming by the dozens. The feminine blue soldier rushed forward, now holding a sliver rifle.

Shepard guessed suicidal charges ran throughout.

But he could see why. The other ship was being overrun, guarded by men in a similar uniform as Captain Florence armed with only silver pistol. The blue soldier aimed her body at a Husk, who had about a foot on her. She stayed low and slammed her left shoulder into the midsection of the Reaper. Using her shoulder, she tossed the Reaper over her, slamming the bastard on the floor while she single-handling fired off the rifle. Bullet piercing cybernetics and biomass, moving from one target to the next.

She turned back to the grounded Husk, using her boot to stomp its face in.

One of the security personnel and Ashley grabbed the wounded from Mark and company, dragging them to the _Normandy _without a single objection from the Captain.

Husks began to crawl all over the transport, scratching the glass

shielding of the cockpit, ripping apart transport electronics. White armored began to provide covering fire, spraying the sounds of what had to be ancient lead-based gunfire. One of them, Banks, pulled a pin from a green ball, throwing it at the edge of the building. A small yellow explosion ignited, tossing Husks off the edge.

Husks began to surround the Cerberus transport, forcing two soldiers to jump out and fend them off.

"Tom, go get the Cerberus bastards. I'll go for Morganson's crew!" Mark ordered his men.

Where Mark needed orders, Shepard didn't. Garrus and Liara pushed in, calling off their targets and putting them down, biotics and bullets. Driving forward. Tali grabbed a shotgun from one of the security crew, opening fire and defending the _Normandy _cargo doors. It was Ashley who turned from the wounded, placing a gun up to Kai Leng's head and forcing him onto knees.

The feminine soldier reached the transport first. She seemed to run out of ammo, used the rifle to hit a Husk right in the face, dropping the gun and turning to tackle another. On the ground, she used her fists and completely beat the Husk's face in.

"Shepard, catch!" James yelled off, tossing a Mattock block, forming in Shepard's hands into the rifle.

Shepard used another incineration ball, flying off and burned Husks alive. Chitka moved around, aiming for optics and shocked them into death.

Continuous fighting, defending the UNSC personnel, _Normandy _from Reaper fighters, and somehow an enemy transport.

The male blue armored got to the Cerberus group, pulling out a pistol and duel-wielded both weapons, aiming the rifle right and the pistol left. He yelled out for the Cerberus soldiers to move, which both did. They covered the soldier's own retreat as all of them backed up towards the _Normandy_.

Garrus and Liara reached the UNSC transport, guiding personnel through and creating a safety line. Men in those grey uniforms slide past through the car, carrying what seemed to be orange brick suitcases or other wounded.

One of them rushed to the Captain, standing center of the roof, kneeling as he shoot off controlled bursts from the black gun.

"Sir! Pelican is fucked, can't move it! We got most of the nukes out, saved one just in case you wanted to blow more stuff up!" She said.

"Copy that." Captain Florence said, turning towards Shepard. "We're moving to the _Normandy_! Wounded, everyone! Kai Leng and his men included. I don't care what the fuck is up between you too, they are Human, they are under UNSC protection! I swear to God, Shepard, you or one of your creepy friends fuck up, I will detonate the _Normandy _from inside out!"

"Believe me, Captain, you don't have to make threats. We'll get you

to the _Infinity_!"

â€|

"UNSC _Danger Close_, we are going down, evacuating all personnel, re-"

Nothing more but static. The _Paris_-class cruiser was making a sweeping arc around the gravitational influence of the large gas giant, curving right through the ring when a squid intercepted at an inverse trajectory. It set the _Danger Close_ off course, killing the majority of the crew from gravitations. Whoever was left, injured and crushed, tried to escape. The squid mined the ship, removing almost all nitrogen-oxygen and compression. Hopefully they died instantly.

Two ships lost so far, UNSC _Paris_-class frigate _Danger Close_ and UNSC _Autumn_-class cruiser _And it Was_. Nearly one-thousand-two-hundred sailors and marines lost.

Combat engagements were going well at the moment. The Fleet of Retribution exosphere group dispersed, curving around the face of the planet while the _Shadow of Intent_ moved away from thermosphere. Longsword and Broadsword squadrons moved and played support and sabotage roles for the Battle Group. While the squids did have maneuverability, speed (frightening FTL), agility, their horrid weakness was hull and shield strength. The AI could calculate easily the correct targeting vector of a MAC round, the problem was maneuvering the bulky fatfuckers into position for firing, using RCS systems and such. But once they got it, it was game over for the squid ship. While they could take a beating from Archer pods and other weapons, MACs bypassed it all.

The _Infinity_ was currently using an elongated arc from the garden world's gravitational influence, heading directly towards the God's Key to link up with Admiral Alvares' fleet and swing back around while the UNSC _Thirteenth Disciple_ took her place for orbital support. Roland ran probability sets earlier, calculating possible squid interfering trajectories based on the crumby threat assessments.

So far, Battle Group Dakota were commencing hit and runs, unable to stop and catch their breath without the squids sneaking up on them. Hopefully, Admiral Alvares reinforcements and/or the Fleet of Retribution will provide them the stability they need.

"Cap, something weird coming in." Roland reported, sweeping through data screen after data screen.

"What's wrong, Roland?" Captain Lasky said, gripping the holo-table railing and taking short breaths from heavy gravitation.

"Eggheads are trying to crack this grav-wave thing to at least get some sort of connectionâ€| We might have cracked it. Some sort of highly unsecured FM channel. Requesting a horn from unidentified contact ship about three-point-one million kilometers away from the garden world. The ship has heavy damages, losing oxygen fast, foundational damage.

"Captain, I know what you're thinking-"

"Then you shouldn't have said anything, Roland. Pull it up on screen." Lasky said, no hesitation whatsoever.

"Aye, aye, sir."

Roland stepped aside, allowing the full image view of the ship to appear. About six-hundred meters in length and sixty meters in width. It was flat, mostly white with blue lines painted throughout the hull. Thicker near the end of the ship, forming something similar to a cockpit while the stretched part was thin, built around a main cannon. A wing on each side spreading downward at around a forty-five degree angle and swooped. A bulky ship, slightly similar to those of the UNSC.

Heavy damage throughout the entire hull. Fires fueled by escaping oxygen. Lasky could see bare foundations through some of the wounds, structural supports laid open for space to corrode.

"What's the status report on that ship?"

"Heavy damage, barely holding in one piece. Two squid one-sixty class ships engaged, cruiser engaged and destroyed both of them with the help of UNSC Longswords and Broadswords which immediately pulled out afterwards. The ship is drifting, with randomized, uncontrolled gravitational shifts within its depression, causing a chaotic trajectory."

"Understood. Roland, bring up the horn. Connect a line to the ship."

"Captain, I understand, but we had direct orders from Lord Hood to not make definite contact unless in extreme emergency-"

"Then connect on a silent frequency."

Roland again paused. Doubt spread across his avatar. He brought up a screen, still looking at the Captain. "Roger that, sir. It's your court martial."

The horn connected, at first static and gargled voices. Then a panicked, scratched voice came through. "This is Captain Jacob Lensly of the SSV Cairo on all frequencies, we have taken heavy damage and are losing oxygen fast! We have civilians on board, I repeat we have civilians on board!"

Cairo?

Captain Lasky fully connected the line against Roland's will. He spoke. "Roger, Captain Lensly. This is Captain Thomas J. Lasky of the UNSC Infinity. We see you at around five-million clicks from our position. We're ready to assist in any way possible. How copy?"

A long moment of uncomfortable silence, static. Lasky thought the ship was already downed until Captain Lensly spoke again. "Roger that, Captain. We don't know how long it will be until the Reapers finish us off."

"Roland, prep up boarding transports. Pull off nearby ships UNSC Mr. House and Planetcracker. Captain Lensly." Lasky said, turning his

attention back to the _Cairo_. "We're moving towards your coordinates. I need schematics of your ships and a statement of how many souls aboard!"

"Copy. I'm sending the schematics now. We were running evacuation runs and support assistance in coordination with the Illium Defense Force and Citadel Specters. One-thousand souls aboard, mostly civilian. But I'm not sure how many are left alive, maybe about three-hundred."

"Copy all. Hang on, Captain. We are moving the _Infinity _to your position. Try to stabilize your trajectory then we'll deploy casevac transports." With that, Captain Lasky cut the line, turning towards the AI and the crew. "Ladies, we're staging a rescue! Redirect vector and get us starboard side of that ship, coordinates five by five by seven over eight by one. Roland, scan everything on that ship, get us a hanger to land."

"Roger that, Captain." Roland said, sullen.

Lasky turned to the view of the void. The burst of new suns in the darkness as UNSC ships fought on. Red dots turned and rushed to meet them head on, only to meet a six-hundred tons of metal or torn apart by fifty and seventy millimeter sparks and the rows of Archer pods.

"If this goes well, I'll end up like Captain Del Rio." Lasky whispered to himself.

7. The world will speak for him

****Aboard SSV **_**Cairo**_**, 500,00 kilometers above Illium, 2186 Citadel Calendar, 10:39****

Captain Anaya loved the city of Nos Astra. She lived there pretty much all her life, had some fun stories to share and even met Commander Shepard; helped solve a problem with a Justicar that almost got her killedâ€¦ Well, at least she was promoted afterwards and worked her way up the chains. But in the later year, the city she loved was burning under her feet as the Illium Militia desperately held off the Reapers. And as her duty as a guardian to Nos Astra, Anaya was assigned to help evacuate and guard civilians to the Relay aboard the SSV _Cairo_, then return planet side to help with the defense.

It seemed unlikely she would ever return as she stood in the front of the crowd of civilians in the dim lights of the cargo hold. The fires haven't reached the room but she knew that it would be only a matter of time.

A baby started to cry somewhere and people started to shake from fear. She said something encouraging and bombastic to calm them down. She didn't even know what she just said. Her doubts submerged almost any thoughts, fear beginning to encompass everything. On the opposite end of the room where they stood was a heavy steel door, which was locked so the fires would be slowed down.

_Goddess help us, _she thought. She never really was religious but it was as good as any time to start.

Whether an answer from the Goddess or not, a red line began to run down through the middle of the door in the likes of a blowtorch cutting through steel.

Was it the Reapers? She thought? _Have they boarded our ship? If it was somebody else they would've just opened the doorsâ€¦|._

The people were silent. Scared breathing, uncontrolled and fast paced. She saw some holding on to friends and family members. Anaya, with two other Turian officers assigned to her chalk, walked forward and drew their weapons upon the increasing cut within the metals.

Her arms shock as she held onto the M-8 Avenger. Sweat began to flow down her body. Despite the fear, Anaya would defend these people with her dying breath, something at least to give back for her good life on Illium.

The red line halted when it reached the bottom of the door and Anaya tensed up, reinforcing the rifle. Instead of the doors blasting at her and the Reapers pouring through like she expected, the doors just fell forward with a thud.

And on the other side stood nine soldiers in armor she had never seen before. Obviously human, they wore green and white armor, and had skull masks over their faces. They held silver and black rifles with no Alliance symbol on any of them. But this wasn't the weird part. Five of them were in blue and white armor, taller than her, maybe even taller than a Krogan. Each one had a distinctive helmet with a mixture of yellow and orange in their visors with armor seemingly more advanced than their counterparts.

The smaller soldiers ran through the room first, squad positions with rifles raised on the civilians. Fingers on the trigger.

"UN Marines, UN Marines!" They yelled, panicking the people to start screaming. Seeing that nobody was shooting at them, one of the soldiers walked up to her, as the rest including the tall soldiers swept the room.

"Captain Max Tanner, UNSC. We're here to get you out of here." He held a very distinctive accent she heard before from another human long ago, and when she asked where that human came from he said: "The Heart of New York City."

"Rightâ€¦|." She said a little dazed. They were human. It was just that, what the hell was the UNSC? Some secret special branch in the Alliance? If it was, she would think they wouldn't just be yelling out to a crowded room. Was it a branch of the Citadel? One she has never heard of? A branch just formed to fight the Reapers? "â€¦|.Ok, it's Captain Anaya. I'll help you get them out of here. I'm assuming you have a ship?"

"Roger that." He said and walked to the civilians looking at the soldiers "Attention everybody!" He announced to the people, forcing them to shut up. "Peoples, we were's sent by neutral friends to get you the hell's out of here. Just follow us and do exactly what we say, a'right?"

He turned to the crowd and for a second, his facial features went into complete shock. He looked upon a human family. It was a normal family, mother, father, two kids. But his face was in disarray for a split second before it returned to a military stoicism.

"Demarco, take control of the situation, I need to contact Captain Lasky." The soldier said.

"Sir, yes sir." One of the taller soldiers responded "Alright! Everyone down the corridor, we'll lead the way! Captain Anaya, right? Make sure everyone gets out of here!"

"Ok." She simply said. All she really could say. Whoever they were, they saved them.

"Everybody keep up!" He then turned to the other taller soldiers "Thorne, Madsen, stay behind. Make sure everybody's gets out of here!"

They both acknowledged, and soon enough the crowd was on the move. Demarco and the tall soldiers jogged down the hallway and the shorter soldiers helped the civilians with their young, old and injured. Medics unfolded stretchers and placed the injured upon the cloth.

Luckily, the path was safe. No breaches and only small fires in sight. She heard that one New Yorker Marine say something on the radio but all she picked up was Priority Directive and Humans. For the moment though, she didn't have time to process it. The New Yorker soldier then caught up with the group and helped another soldier with an injured civilian.

The group took a right and ended up at the hanger. The hanger was partially damaged, with some fires burning across the connecting walkway to the hallway. Blue shields illuminated the metal beings of the interior as space combat continued without end. And with the bright metals gave way to the ugliest ship Anaya has ever seen.

It had four engines, two on each side. It was a tannish green and the front looked like that of an ancient air-conditioning unit. The doors were in the middle of the ship, opened revealing the large, barren inside. More of the smaller soldiers stood guard.

"Ladies!" The New Yorker soldier said stepping in front of the transport "Injured are first, women and childrens second, men third, and the dead last. Fill the transport up, it will then leave and a next one will arrive! Let's move 'em out!"

The soldiers helped board the injured onto the cargo hold. One after another, as medics bolstered IV bags for the wounded, but only for humans. They ignored the needs of Turians and Asari. Whatever the reason, Captain Anaya didn't have time to ask as the transport was filled and moved out the lock shield, disappearing into black. After a moment, another transport landed and opened its cargo doors.

"Alright, new transport, let's move it, let's go!" The New Yorker said as he and the soldiers then helped the rest and continued this until Anaya, the officers and the soldiers were left. The transport left and another soon arrived in the same fashion.

"Last one out of here, move 'um out!" Then the soldiers one by one entered the transport. Anaya and the officers boarded.

The green brick resided from the walkway, closing its doors and the hissing of pressurized air followed. A small window allowed for sight, and the walkway grew out of view as the transport passed through the lock shields to reveal the burning wreckage of the _Cairo_

"This is Big Ant zero-two, all civilians are evacuated and transports are heading back to the _Infinity_, ETA: forty seconds. XXX-XD Directive report wills be filed once aboard."

The New Yorker then turned to Anaya. "Sorry for the hasty introductions. We'll take your peoples back to our fleet and get them food and medical attention. We promise we won't hurt them and if any of you can provide any information regarding your people's anatomy so we's can help 'em out would sure be appreciated."

Well of course they wouldn't hurt them, why would they even say that? And provide information? They had to have data regarding species' anatomy. They were recusing people over Illium, a very diverse planet, half the population being Asari. Everyone in the galaxy knew that.

"Hey?" Said one of the taller soldiers this time, before Anaya could say her two-bits "Do you think we finally beat Crimson?"

As he said this, Anaya could see the darkness lit by orange suns of shell fire. Another transport raced by them at incredible speeds.

"Better luck next time!" She heard from the taller soldier's comm.

She continued to look out the window. Why would they promise not to hurt anyone? For a moment, she thought they might be with Cerberus. But she knew they wouldn't have enough resources to stage an operation like this. Either way, they would've at least seen one Cerberus symbol by now.

A black object shrouded them as they rode underneath the belly giving owner to a ship. The transport lifted upwards and they were in a pearl white hanger, and outside the window she could see the transports lining up to the left and right, perfectly touching down on the landing pad in front of the entrance.

She could see crews of support in yellow and blue. But in front of them were dozens of soldiers dressed in white and red armor. Each one aimed a weapon at the transports, fingers barely passing the point of opening fire.

Their transport landed, opening the doors to the hangar. More soldiers holding silver weapons poured through, aiming only at Anaya and the Turians. The New Yorker and the rest of the men calmly stepped off.

"Captain Anaya?" One of the soldiers walked up to her. Unlike the other ones, he held an insignia of major on his collar and only held

a holstered pistol. "Major Reynolds. Any and all xeno peoples are to follow me immediately."

****Surface of garden world****

****2557 Military Calendar, 10:44****

Five seconds after drop****

Rolling hills characterized most of the landscape, with a city about two kilometers away. He saw three enemies in front of them, one very human-like while the other two had huge mouths, right arms replaced by weapons.

He didn't even observe the rest of the world or anything specific of the enemy. The Chief kicked the pod door, hitting one of the big-mouths and throwing him to the ground. He grabbed his M45D shotgun, moving quickly and ducking as a one of the big-mouths fired off a red and black orb of light. The Chief used his shoulders and knocked down the squid, aiming down the sights and pulling the trigger. A pulpy mess of red biomass and metals, oddly dissolving into ash. He turned on the other one, pulling out his MA5D with one hand and unleashed round after round. Stabilizing from recoil through pure strength. Bullet pierced skin or bounced off metals, yellow little lights glowed within the blue abyss as he crumbled and dissolved.

Fire still continued with the rain. ODST pods were still landing throughout. The Chief took cover near a smaller hill, black orbs passing by. He lifted himself from the ground, using the MA5D and unleashing controlled burst after burst. There were maybe about seven of them. Big-mouths lead by a soldier with jagged armor.

"Jesus, mate, it's you!" A familiar voice said from nearby.

The Chief quickly turned to find a man dressed in ODST armor, black gear un-camouflaged within the confines of green grass. He held a MA5D rifle. The visor turned to a clear view from grey. A young, gaunt face with blue eyes that owned a hyper Australian voice.

"Chief, it's me! Private Dubbo? Well, actually Lieutenant Dubbo nowâ€¦ There were rumors, butâ€¦ Oui, mate, it's good to see ya'!" He said. His pod landed about twenty meters from the Chief's, rolled against the side of the hill. Small spats of blood patterned his chest plate and knuckles. Dried blood covered his mouth.

Some sort of red bolt passed by, causing him to stay down and throw himself against the grass hill next to the Chief.

The Chief only nodded. "Good to see you again."

For a moment there was nothing else between them, just a quiet gust of wind, the pattering of rain the Chief just noticed now. Orbs still passed by, sounds of fire and trigger shots. Dubbo quickly looked around, had to yell to get anything audible out over the gunfire. "Right, mate. You the only one?"

"The enemy AA fire forced most of my squad to spread. Unknown where. At our current position, I'm about four kilometers from my target.

Where's the rest of your platoon?"

"Uh, no idea. I think some of the AA fire killed some of my men. Bastards. If their lost, hopefully they can form up with other units or with Colonel Buckâ€¦ Wait, who the hell's on the line?"

"Master Chief?" A voice said through his comms. A face appeared on the Chief's visor. A young soldier, clean shaved, buzzed-cut hair. "Spartan Jared Miller from _Infinity _CIC. I'll serve today as your eye in the sky and tactical advisor."

Spartan tactical advisor. That was a first. "Copy that. Can you get us a tactical output of enemy numbers and position, and a topography map of the local area?"

"Roger. High-orbit drone prowlers from the _Another Brick in the Wall _scanned positions. You've got a lot of badies between you and the local AA guns. This one is the primary cannon defending the topographical area for our firebases. We've picked up about a handful of UNSC tags from the _Legend After _about a klick out under a Lieutenant Duvall, and a few spread ODST pods about a quarter-klick. I'm directing them to your position, link up if you can, continue to the AA gun. If you create a large enough gap, I can try to peel off a _Paris _frigate to provide troposphere support."

A map uploaded onto the Chief's visor. The other ODST landing site was northwest of their position, cradled in a flat area and completely abandoned. About a klick away stood the AA cannon, with Lieutenant Duvall's pod a few dozen meters out. Overall, there were about five men. A trench half-a-klick out, cutting through the land like a river, separating the AA gun, Duvall, and the other ODSTs from the Master Chief.

"Copy that, Spartan Miller. We have engaged xeno hostiles. Standby for reconnection." The Master Chief cut the line.

"Hold on Master Chief, I'm here-"

That was too much. He wasn't her. Another Spartan, supposedly similar to him, providing tactical support? The Chief completely blocked the call. He was able to work in the field before, alone.

He turned to Dubbo. "Sir. Friendlies about three kilometers out under Lieutenant Duvall, and ODSTs coming in to our northeast. There's a trench about a few hundred meters, if we can push through, we can move along the line and link up with Duvall."

Dubbo looked at him for a brief moment. The Chief wasn't sure why. But he's seen it before, on Earth, on the _Pillar of Autumn_. It was usually from the marines and army. It was hard to tell what it was. Fear, awe?

"Right. Right. We can move it along the trench. Uh, these guys are our first priority." Dubbo trailed off.

His tone was almostâ€¦unsure.

The Chief didn't bother. He only nodded, raising himself and opening fire. He pushed forward, orbs easily absorbed by the MJOLNIR shields. He turned to the right, shell after shell, recoil seemingly nothing

but a minor nuisance. A big-mouth took the blow, kneeling down into the dirt. He tried to lift himself up, only to meet the hand of the Chief, grabbing onto his face and digging inches deep into the biomass. Eyes disconnecting and slushing within black liquids.

The Chief pushed the thing back, no resistance at all. A body turned to ash. He was at half-shields, turning to face the other six. Dubbo, in all the power a single soldier can provide, opened up. He provided suppressive fire, forcing the Chief to be the one to provide fire discipline. The Chief found an artillery crater, sprinting and ducking within. He reloaded both the shotgun and assault rifle, looking out into the grey sky, taking out the shotgun and leaving it on the dirt with pumped a forend. Slowly, his shields began to respawn from the damage. A jagged armored xeno tried to get the jump, raising a rifle over the crater horizon. The Chief didn't even need to think. Using reflex response and grabbed the end of the rifle.

The xeno idiotically tried to hold on, body pulled forward and stumbling over the descending dirt. The Chief used his other hand, grabbing the pistol grip of the shotgun and shoving it into the xeno's chest. He pulled the trigger, modified choke unleashing shell rounds into metal armor and biomass. He trucked forward, nearly lifting the xeno body into the air.

It was still alive, the Chief using the momentum and keeping the xeno as a body-shield. The squid covered his upper body and head, multiple black orbs hitting their fellow xeno. The Chief was nearing one of the other big-mouths; his body shield lost its glowing white eyes, legs beginning to dissolve into ash. He tossed the body at the big-mouth, barely stunning the squid.

It was Dubbo that took him down. A sudden burst of yellow light that twisted the big-mouth, knocking it on its back. Dubbo rushed in, aiming down and unleashing whatever was left of his clip. He got hit by a black orb, the lighter yellow shield of the ODSs taking the shot. He jumped into the Chief's crater, with face turned towards the hills.

Three left. The Chief turned to find more orbs firing, and something else coming over the horizon.

"Reinforcements coming in! Friendlies, watch your fire!" Dubbo yelled out.

One individual crawled over the hill, covered in ODS armor with red and white markings, holding a rocket launcher in one hand by the handle and a Marksman rifle in the other, with a holstered MA5D. Rain splattering upon his modified shoulder pads. The entire uniform looking worse for wear.

"Holy shit, they sent fucking him." Lieutenant Mickey said. He walked down, carefully through mud and shaken grass. Orbs barely missed him, but he didn't care. "Holy fucking Christ. I can't f—fuck me. Righto. I think I saw some sort of AA cannon thingy firing that same blue light stream that was hitting our pods. See a few bad guys between us and them.

"Calvary! Move in!"

More ODS'Ts appeared. Black armor pouring in, maybe around nine or ten of them, armed to the teeth. They joined in the overwhelming victory, staying low and moving from cover to cover. The big-mouths were no match, quickly dispersing or turning to ash.

Lieutenant Mickey and another ODS'T approached the Chief from his leisure walk. Dubbo joined them, climbing out of the crater.

"Right, mates." Dubbo began. "Mickey, who you got?"

"I met up with ten guys from different battalions under the Been. They formed up into an irregular unit under Gunnery Sergeant O'Brien." Mickey introduced the ODS'T. A young, angry-looking face with bright red hair. "We're all organized, and combat-abled on your orders."

He referred to the Chief, not the actually commanding officer.

"Lieutenant Dubbo is the highest commanding officer. Thus he's in charge of the mission." The Chief turned to Dubbo, who only stood still for a long while.

"Sir? I mean, we can relate highest echelon rung to the-" Mickey began.

The Chief caught faint sounds of distant fire, rocket launchers and high-pitched screeches. On the map, Commander Palmer was rallying local forces in the area, moving forward to eliminate the AA despite the heavy losses. And farther out, Colonel Buck organized all ground troops, securing positions in the open fields.

From the reports, they might've been battling one-sixty squid ships. He could vaguely see them in the distance. Standing upon tentacles with the every-once-and-the-while beam of red and black light.

"Stand by, get Spartan Miller on the line." Dubbo said.

The small tactical screen displayed the Spartan's face again. Dubbo spoke. "Spartan Miller, this is Lieutenant Dubbo of callsign Deacon 3-4. We've meet up with an irregular, reorganized platoon under Lieutenant Mickey. Multiple hostiles down. Be advised, we'll be regrouping with Lieutenant Duvall and proceed to AA target. But we don't have the equipment to take it down, hal copy?"

"Copy, Deacon. Be advised, Lasky managed to peel off some Shortswords to act as Wild Weasel teams. Possible bombers available, ready up laser targeting sights. However, Palmer's calls are priority. Especially with those ground squids."

That was the best option available. With those squid ships acting as essentially Scarabs or Krakens, tropospheric bombers would be the barren-bones to possibly take it down.

Essentially for the moment, they'd have to pull off on their own. Try to focus on actually getting there.

A stream of blue light erupted near the city. It made a low-hum sound. It was the same stream of light that was hitting the

Pods.

"Sir?" The Chief said, looking to Dubbo. "Like I said, we can use the trenches. It's the fastest and safest way to reach Lieutenant Duvall."

Dubbo slightly nodded, looking to other faces. They only waited.

"Copy!" Dubbo said. "We march on through, like the Chief said. Connect with any friendlies we see and kick some ass along the way. Hopefully we can reach the AA soon, before the flyboys start bitching."

â€

**Forty-five minutes after drop**

There's always been that commotion around the Spartans, holding them in high esteem or dehumanizing them, and in rare cases an odd mixture of both in the effect of doublethink.

Dubbo had served with the Chief wherever he went since Installation 04. He survived the War because of him, witnessed his full capabilities. The rumors going around that he was alive was pretty much the talk for the past three days. Ironically, people were the one to keep babbling their mouths, the Spartans just shut theirs. The Chief specifically always stayed quiet, talking only when dearly needed to Johnson, both Miranda and Jacob Keyes, or Cortana. Dubbo just didn't really know what to expect, even how to react. Happy for the moment, bewildered possiblyâ€

Maybe that's how it would've been in a non-threatening situation. Out here, he was glad that he was serving under him again. Guaranteed mission success and a lot of his men getting out of here alive. But still, he worried for the Chief, even if he was a Spartan. Despite his distance, the few cold words. But still, the Spartan fought on despite the hell that would've broken a lot of people.

"Watch your left!" Someone yelled. There was an explosion, vibrating the metals of Dubbo's armor, sending two ODSTs flying in the air along with grass and dirt.

There were screams and cries from the two, trying to crawl out of the way to the others. Dubbo could see the blood seeping through one of the soldier's leg armor, gear disjointed and revealing a red mesh underneath. For all he knew, his leg might've been entirely ripped off saved together by the gear.

"MEDIC! MEDIC!" One of them screamed in a hoarse voice, sobbing in between words, violently shaking on the ground.

Dubbo rushed over, holstering his rifle. Reaching the soldier, he forced him to stay on the ground. Dubbo removed one of his shoulder plates, writing underneath on the uniform for blood type and other medical information. Someone else rushed over, sliding on the grass. She had the medical cross on her shoulder plates, a large gear bag and no visible weapon on her.

"I got 'em, sir!" She said, rushing to remove a gear plate to get to

the flesh.

He silently nodded, lifting himself up and hunching over as he moved on.

"Where the fuck are the Shortswords?! We have heavy resistance, and multiple causalities! We are not combat operational, I repeat we are not combat operational!" A radio operator, Specialist Isaak Amos, screamed into the comm. line, lying against the side of a hill with others as they opened fired.

"Shortswords have been engaged by squid interceptors, or are currently deployed under Spartan Palmer's command. I'm talking to the Navy, trying to peel off a frigate to provide stratosphere bombardment support, but right now Captain Lasky needs everything we've got out here." Spartan Miller reported back from the comms.

Who would've thought the day would come where the people die while the Spartan sits behind a computer screen?

Sure, unfortunately they were used to being screwed over with no support. But never had a Spartan only sit back and watch.

Another sharp blare, ground vibrating like an earthquake. The squid AA battery still keeping a constant check of the sky with a stream of violent blue light. It looked similar to the squid ships, top mantle replaced with the opening for the cannon. Standing loosely on four legs about four-hundred-fifty meters out.

Dubbo could see the desolated grouping of fox holes and artillery craters occupied with about five marines spread throughout. Only a couple dozen meters away, bullet after bullet as they tried to create a gap for the ODS group.

The Master Chief leaped from the trench, assault rifle firing at will. One of the bug squids was fired on, a few rounds bouncing off static shields. Rounds of orb firing from the bug, each one making a sonic popping sound with a shockwave that jolted the skin and bone underneath.

The Chief turned attention towards him, reloading a clip and charging forward. There was a split second gap between the loading sound and the fire off as the bug aimed. Whereas no average person with that amount of time could dodge it, the Chief stepped out of the way with ease. The only thing hitting him was the flying dirt and a few sparks that bounced off his shields or passed through and singed the armor.

"What the hell is he doing? He has no cover!" O'Brien yelled through the squad comms.

"Push forward! Spread out and-" Mickey began.

"Negative, stay in position and scrape off the enemy. The Chief's got it, just provide him covering fire!" Dubbo said, cutting off Mickey. He switched over to the radio operator's channel, up to Spartan Miller on _Infinity _comms. "_Infinity _actual, this is Deacon 3-4, we're meeting heavy resistance. Target is in sight, about a few hundred meters. I can get laser guidance on there. Is there not one

available Shortsword? Possible Wild Weasel assets?"

"Negative. The Wild Weasels we've got are trying to engage but that AA is too precise to get our ships anywhere near it. We'd have to have a low strike, about two-hundred meters away from the deck, which isn't exactly a bright idea. I can try to get some of Colonel Buck's men to provide support, but they're pinned down by heavy pour of squid forces from the west."

The Chief knocked down the bug, creating a corridor to the foxhole. The marines were getting shredded, a black and red round from random directions knocking up dirt. One of them stood too high, hit in the chest by a random round and sent flying across the hole.

"Chip! What the fuck is the Chief doing?!" Mickey yelled.

The Chief was breaking platoon line-up tactics. He charged forward, switching out the rifle for the shotgun. It was one of the rifle-holding squids, stuck in a trench. The Chief jumped down, a full ton smashing down on the poor bastard. Dubbo didn't see what happened to the body, only the Spartan climbing out of the trench without using a single shell.

He reached the marines, straining the platoon perimeter. And it was collapsing, more and more ODSTs being hit out.

There was only one option. _Goddamn it_. Dubbo yelled out through the comms. "Form up on the Chief! We'll hold onto a perimeter in the foxholes, get the wounded in the center. Now!"

Usually, moving a blob of people from one area to another under fire wasn't exactly a good idea as far as maneuver tactics go. But then again, it might've been the best decision. The squids keep appearing from everywhere, over random hills in every direction as they kept moving forward in the trench. Sometimes the group would meet up with a couple ODSTs, but mostly it was overwhelming squid contact. Hunkering down with the Chief wasn't the worst idea, and either way, they had to link up with those marines.

Dubbo was the first to get up. The others soon followed, some with injured carried on their backs. Instead of announcements of confusion or "disagreement" (for the lack of a better term), there was only replies of compliance.

"Lieutenant Muhammad Duvall! UNSC _Legend After_! Thank Christ you guys got here!" One of the marines yelled out as Dubbo got closer and closer. He seemed to notice the Chief for the first time. "Christâ€¦It's actually him."

Dubbo leaped into the trench, armor hitting the dirt. He looked out to the other ODSTs, about three abled-body, the medic, and four wounded. They moved into the craters, readying defensive positions under the fire. He grabbed Duvall's collar guard, pulling him face to face.

"Right, mate. Lieutenant Chip Dubbo, UNSC _Infinity_. Our mission is to knock out those AA batteries, create a hole for the cavalry to land. We'll get you out of here!"

"Copy. Our pilot flew our pod completely off trajectory in order to

avoid that fucking thing. We'll help you however we can! We have a weapons stockpile. A few Spartan Lasers were saving up, a few other rifles, and ammo coming out the ass!"

Dubbo acknowledged, pulling off and setting up positions. The craters provided decent cover, rifles aiming in all directions under the AA. The Lieutenant crawled towards the center of the defensive position to the wounded as the medic tended to them.

"Sir! Lance Corporal Piper Æ-zlem, corpsman! Seventh platoon, UNSC _Infinity _group!" She said, a young voice that almost sounded like a teenager. "Stuff's eating at them, but it ain't as bad as plasma wounds! I got biofoam in them, and plasma fluid hooked up about. They're stabilized for now!"

He nodded, looked around for the nearest forced volunteers. "Right, Æ-zlem you're on me. O'Brien!" Dubbo called out. O'Brien turned around, holding a sniper rifle with a holstered battle rifle. "We're peeling off, see if there's a structural weakness within that AA we can utili-

There was a loud, agonizing scream. Of complete pain and horror. Roared and echoed throughout the rolling hills. And the fire seemed to silence, the rain provided that thunderous beat. A scream so familiar to hell, of dying women found upon the Covenant glassings. The strain of their vocal cords, near breaking. But this scream was unhuman, a tortured body begging anybody to end its life, synthetic and deafening.

Death.

Its owner walked over the hill, boring the blue eyes that the squids held. The horrifying scream did fit its owner as a tortured body, deprived of any food and had a belly sticking out as if strained of protein, pushed forward. The stomach looked like something was surgical forced in there, with a single disgusting line traveling down the center of the skin. Sickly pale-blue skin, with lesions of blue lights at random intervals throughout the body. Her arms were augmented with giant claws that reached her feet. Robotic centers patterned her blue body as tentacles stuck out the back of her head. With every step, it lumbered as if she were in severe pain, with a face of absolute anger. Tubes traveled along her body, suddenly depressing into her skin and passing the barrier of organic and synthetic, surrounding her hips. Collar bones that stretched from the neck and possessing most of the shoulders, skin barely able to cover it.

Bones and stretched skin, uneven, diseased almost. Dubbo could see its teeth, brittle with only molars. Those same lesions filled with blue lights, scarily human-like facial features.

And it didn't move when it reached the top of the hill. Standing still, a chest heavily expanding under every breath.

It seemed to multiple, splitting images that morphed in and out of its original body, surrounded by a black and blue veil of energetic light. It disappeared, replaced by a blue and black blur traveling from hill to hill, a body in the midst that was unmoving. Appearing from a new ridge, moving to the next through the traveling blue curtain.

"What the fuck is that thing?" One of the ODSTs yelled out, rifle held down, trying to find a target path. "Sir, what the fuck do we do?!"

The ODST was right. _What the fuck was that thing?_

Dubbo didn't even have time to respond. Whatever the fuck that thing was reached the edge of the defensive perimeter, right in front of the screaming ODST.

It grabbed his chest plate with one arm, lifting the entire body in the air. The squid was maybe seven feet tall overall. The ODST dropped her rifle on the floor, squirming in vain as the squid kept its grip. Everyone turned to it, unloading clip after clip, bullets bouncing off a protective blue shield or piercing through to fall off the sickly skin. It shoved its claw through the ODST's armor, metal providing no barrier as dark red blood began to ooze out and pour down the claw.

The body didn't seem to stop moving. The squid tossed him aside like a ragdoll, finally turning to the rest of the platoon as if it suddenly noticed them. It shadowed back into the blur, from crater to crater, visible right in front of Æ-zlem.

It tried to reach down for her, with Piper screaming and falling on her back, crawling the hell away from it. Before the squid could even bend down and reach her, it was tackled at thigh point.

It was pushed on the ground, a stiff and rigid body trying to get its bearings. It produced something within its claw, a small blue and black ball with curtains of blue shining lights. It expanded, moving past her fingers.

The Master Chief lifted himself up, tried to grab the squid before it could do anything.

Another deafening scream. Dubbo could feel his eardrums on the edge of bursting. It was louder than fucking gunshots. He opened fired, along with O'Brien and Mickey as Æ-zlem scrambled for a rifle. Everyone else turned to the main defense, trying to avoid the squid creature.

The Chief tried to grab its arm, but the blue ball was smashed against his helmet. He was forced off, the yellow light igniting across his body, signaling rapid shield depilation. It tried to use its claws, thinking it can perform the same maneuver used against the ODST. The Spartan's shields were still acting as if it were being hit, and finally the yellow coding broke off the armor.

The Chief pulled out the shotgun, pumping it and firing off into the belly. Pieces of blue liquid and biomass dispersed into the dirt and against the Chief's armor. Dubbo finally noticed the thin blue line that took place of the visible yellow shields. He checked the squad vital meter. O'Brien and Mickey were already linked in, vitals normal, for whatever reason Æ-zlem was linked in also. A panicked heartrate for obvious reasons, but otherwise normal. But the Chief's vitals were dropping. A slowed heart rate in the yellow.

Whatever that blue shit was integrated into the gear, it hurted him.

Vitals kept dropping down, reminding Dubbo of the ending days of the War. Those moments where "Cortana" was talking to the Chief, dead to the world.

Except right then the ghost was fighting this time. The fucking monstrosity tried to form another blue ball, only to be stopped finally by the shells from Dubbo's assault rifle.

He finally noticed the perimeter collapse. In a mere forty-five seconds of fighting, those weird weaponless squids were trying to storm the perimeter, only to be held by the few ODSTs grabbing shotguns and SMGs. Squid cannon bugs bombarded the dirt, barely missing the men

Others tried to lessen the flow, a makeshift fireteam forming around a marine armed with a railgun. Craters lost one by one as the ODSTs fell back. Overall, there were about seven men left.

Bullets pierced through the squid monster's skin, throwing out the same degree of biomass and blue liquid as the Chief. It kneeled on the ground, screaming louder, blue and black shrouds surrounding it. Dubbo was about to move up, unleash whatever was left of the clip within its face. And then it disappeared, leaving only a EMP-like burst that distributed his and everyone else's shields.

Another fire off of the AA cannon, seemingly rupturing the ground. Dubbo caught where the monster went, behind the enemy frontal assault, pulling out from any further damage to itself.

"Mickey, hold the line! O'Brien, grab a sniper, armor-piercing rounds, see if you can soften up those bugs!" Dubbo said, turning to the Chief and seeing he was heading back to the weapons cache.

Christ.

He also headed to the cache; he wasn't going to let that wanker get away with killing one of his men, and nearly killing another. The Chief was fine for the moment, his vitals still staying in the yellow. Weapons stashed in green crates, lined up neatly. He traded the assault rifle for a railgun.

"Piper! Form up as a fireteam, provide me covering fire!" Dubbo called out. She was in the crater over, defending over the wounded with a Marksmen rifle.

"Right! Who would've ever thought those guys can use the force, am I right?" She said over the comms.

Dubbo didn't even know what she was talking about. His shields loaded back up; he stood upon the evened grass at the edge of the crater. A stray black shell hit him, absorbed by the shields. He aimed down the scope, looking at the face of the squid.

It stared him back. And the black and blue shroud erupted, the squid disappeared again. Reappearing on places throughout the battlefield.

And if Dubbo knew this bastard, he knew where it was going.

"Chief! Chief!" Dubbo called out.

He turned around, and the body of the squid appeared in front of the ODST.

He jumped out of the way, and the Chief finally broke through the seemingly KIA state. His vitals were normalizing, turned to the squid with his weapon and charged forward. Dubbo crawled back, trying to get to a safe distance to use.

A dozen meters would suffice, the Chief punched in a few rounds, and he could see them finally pierce the skin. Dubbo called out, telling him to get the hell out of the way. And it was only a mere glance through the side of his helmet, and the Spartan jumped back.

Dubbo locked in, and fired off the gun. The recoil causing the stock to collide with his gear that sent a stinger to his right shoulder. The slug ripped off an entire arm, blue liquid splattering everywhere. The thing stumbled onto the dirt, legs trying to regain balance. The Chief reengaged, multiple rounds in the face this time.

Pieces of matter spread onto the dirt. And the startling face along with a dead, blue eye was completely ripped off. It was on knees, panting. Dubbo could see it slowly turn to ashes. It looked up, on last defiant screech and outstretched claw as it tried to grab someone in vain.

Dubbo didn't even bother to watch it time. He turned back to the defenses, the perimeter was being pushed slowly but surely back. Another earthquake from the AA, shaking everything off balance and painting it in a blue glow.

They didn't have the necessary gear to take that thing out. Wild Weasel assets were a no go, so were any other available bombers, any exosphere supportâ€¦

One of the artillery squids appeared out of the herd, opening fire and knocking out a few ODSTs off their feet. One of them didn't get back up.

The Lieutenant and the Chief ducked down into the crater.

They were down to six abled bodies. And from what Dubbo saw, the squid horde was only getting bigger.

â€¦

The sterile air made Shepard's nose hurtâ€¦ The detox from high levels of adrenaline to only medium levels of near panic. No rush of fresh air from Illium, only recycled nitrogen-oxygen. It made the Commander uncomfortable.

All around, rifles pointed in three directions. One of the Cerberus soldiers tried to hand back Kai Leng's blades. Before he moved an inch, Captain Florence simply uttered a command to thisâ€¦ "Contradiction", and the nuke cases switched from cold to hot. Apparently those tiny hexagonal suitcases the grey uniformed people carried out were nukes.

Shepard's crew primarily had their weapons aimed at Kai Leng. A few, such as Garrus, aimed at the UNSC. The able-bodied surrounded their wounded, tended by their own and Doctor Chawkas, reluctantly let in with a rifle directly aimed at her skull as she scanned their wounds and distributed limited amounts of medi-gel. Shepard didn't hold a weapon, neither did Liara while Tali still held her shotgun, readying to fire at point blank on Cerberus.

The _Normandy_ began to pull out of the city, as reported by Joker. Inertia dampeners smoothing the ride as the pitch turned from troposphere to stratosphere at nearly eighty-five degrees.

"Set off the nuke we left in the Pelican, send the squid bastards to hell." Mark ordered to Contradiction.

"Belay that." Shepard interjected, as if he had authority over Mark's crew. "There might be civilians still down there. We'll not have a nuke go off in the city."

"UNSC assets were left behind, and we'll _not_ have the enemy acquire them. This decision isn't up to you, Shepard." Mark stepped a little to his right, showing even more hexagonal briefcases that Shepard didn't even notice brought aboard. "...Nor is it up to me. If you have an asset aboard the _Normandy_ that can take out the Pelicans, then by all means we can turn around and knock 'em out."

He almost said the last sentence sarcastically. Shepard tried to ignore it. "We do. We can turn around, and eliminate the transports with a controlled missile launch from the _Normandy_. You don't have to eliminate an entire city just to take out a few things. Either way, is it really a good idea with your soldiers deploying on the surface?"

Mark didn't say anything for a moment. He looked back to his men, and nodded. "Turn around then."

Shepard activated to ship's comm. link. "Joker? Turn the _Normandy_ around; eliminate all first-contact transports on the building."

His voice echoed throughout the hanger. "Rightâ€¦just turn from a straight-shot up. Aye, aye, Commander."

That would delay transportation for at least half-an-hour. There was a limit to the amount of strain the inertia dampeners can remove. They'd have to readjust the pitch, and then make a swooping arc within upper troposphere.

The nukes deactivated. No one even moved to press a button.

And for the longest five minutes, there wasn't a word. Chakwas and other UNSC medics tended to the wounded, with the occasional groan every once and a while. The medics tapped on small data-screens, moving it over body parts.

"Doctor Chakwas, how are they?" Shepard said, still looking directly at Florence. Cortez was in the medcenter. He was stable for now, and should be fine for a few hours.

"I don't understand how they lasted as long as they did, but they

won't last any longer without emergency medical attention. I've got internal bleeding, minor organ rupture, and severe blunt trauma wounds. There's some type of yellow pus-like substance developing in their wounds, which seems to be holding them togetherâ€|"

"Biofoam. Essentially the trauma bandage for people with no medical experience." Contradiction said. "_Only_ thing holding them together. We have a couple of canisters left, but you're right. They need actual medical attention."

"We can take them to the hospitals aboard the _Infinity_." Captain Florence said.

"Your ship has fully staffed and equipped hospitals?" Chawkas asked, slightly patronizing, still moving around from soldier to soldier.

"Multiple. Fully equipped, full time staff including specialized personnel and facilities primed for any major surgeries. The _Infinity_ has to in order to stage an invasion like this. Hell, they might've brought in the _Hopeful_." The Captain said.

Technically, fleets do have medical staff to handle a variety of injuries, but anything truly horrific would've killed any sailor in the confines of depressurized space. The only fully equipped hospital in space, is of course, the Citadel, being the only space-faring object to have enough power and resources to contribute to such 'miscellaneous' needs. And now they're taking on entire divisions of causalities. Nearly overcrowded, running off of the scrapes. So if Captain Florence had that much confidence in this _Infinity_, _then it had to _handle whatever amount of troops were in those five kilometer to six kilometer ships. _Who knows how many troops those ships held within their storage, thousands, tens of thousands?

_But then again, _in sense of space/ground warfare, it was only in the matter of a few hundred, sometimes a few thousand deployed at a time. Invasions were one of the hardest things to pull off in matters of logistical strategy. That's one of the major reasons the Reapers were able to push so far. Their troops could be compacted in tight spaces, no food or water needed, no medical attention, if in need of reinforcements the Reapers have enough pull to bring in another fleet or just transfer the losses of the enemy into assets of their own.

And now it seems the UNSC can pull out dozens of ships at will.

"Captain, sir, butâ€| Is it really the best idea to try and contact Captain Lasky within an unidentified ship, with _them_?" One of the blue soldiers said. His name was Tom.

Captain Florence nodded. "Usually, in UNSC protocol you'd all be considered rebels and the _Infinity_ would probably shoot your ship down, but we don't exactly have that luxury to make everything black and white."

"Why?" Shepard merely said.

"We don't have the luxury?"

"No. That'd you consider us rebels?"

Mark was silent for a moment, suddenly observing the hanger bay. Noticing every individual. "I'm still trying to figure out what's going on. But under law, all of Humanity is under UNSC jurisdiction. And by definition, the establishment of new governmental and/or militaristic institutions that is not under or has been approved by the UNSC is direct rebellion."

He said it quietly, almost causally. This wasn't an example of claim, this was an ultimatum. And that sentence only gave a larger insight into the condition of this UNSC. Shepard didn't even know how to respond. This law so arrogant to say the least.

It was Liara who responded of course. "Captain, theâ€| ambiguous morality is questionable to us at the moment. And frankly, I won't even begin to argue the dilemma."

"Me neither." Florence said. "But that's what's implied. As for your Xeno allies, I'm not even sure what they'll do with them."

"If you're worried about them posing any threat, I can guarantee you that they will bring you no harm to you or your allies." Shepard said. "Liara, Tali, and Garrus Vakarian." He finally introduced the Turian. Garrus made a small mocking bow as he still held the rifle. "They have worked over the past two years with human allies. They can be trusted."

"Maybe, Commander." Mark simple said, he eyed EDI. Didn't say anything beyond that about her. "And what about you, Lieutenant Leng? You've been awful quiet."

"Yeah, trust Cerberus and they're guaranteed to blow up from the inside." Tali mumbled.

Leng was about to defend himself, before he was interrupted by Ashley. "You keep your goddamn mouth shut!"

"Let him speak." Mark said, collective.

Leng only eyed-off Ashley, a brief silence before speaking. "Captain, I understand your concern. But you can find that Cerberus is no threat. We can be allies."

"Just deliver our men to the _Normandy_, or any other UNSC UNSC isn't looking for allies. We already have enough fucked up ones already. But, I appreciate the offer-"

"Our objectives are similar. Ensure the safety and advancement of Humanity." Leng said, daring to interrupt the Captain.

Silence. Rifles remaining steady. EDI calmly stepped forward, unafraid. It was a long while, a Captain still holding a hard-ridden face as he spoke. "What?"

The Captain subconsciously lowered his rifle, muzzle at the floor. His face in disarray from the usual stoicism.

"What they say is true." EDI said.

"EDIâ€|" Shepard replied, unsure whether to keep her quiet or let Florence know the true nature of Cerberus.

"Shut it." Mark said, quietly. Shepard could barely hear it.

EDI took no offense, at least physical shown, to his words. "Cerberus is a human paramilitary organization developed in response to the current political strife within humanity due to their lacking place within the galactic community. Their main objective, as stated, is the advancement and protection of humanity at any costs, by any means necessary."

Shepard was about to call out what Cerberus really wanted. To control the Reapers, to give themselves power which everyone knew wouldn't work. They might be able to justify themselves that it was for the sake of humanity, but from what Shepard sawâ€|

If Captain Florence knew what Cerberus did, would he accept it? The unneeded sacrifices for advancement?

"Well, maybe, we should figure something out first." Contradiction said. A small glare appeared on the visor moving downwards across the glass and removing the color coding to reveal a female face. As Contradiction spoke, the face stayed still. "Humanityâ€| the UNSC, and our recent allies have only created a sorta pseudo-community only a couple years ago. So, you obviously don't know anything about the UNSC. About the War?"

"When you say the "War", the only the war that can possibly correlate to what you're talking about on file is the First Contact war. A three month conflict between humanity and a species known as the Turians." EDI said. "It was humanity's unfortunate introduction into the galactic community."

"Okayâ€|" Contradiction said. "Yetâ€|That isn't the one I'm speaking about."

He was silent for a moment, his voice coming back on. "Cap, I've got a local secured channel. UNSC frequency. Sounds like it's from the Helljumpers."

He trailed off, letting the Captain speak. He also had the same odd expression that leveled with Contradiction's tone. "Get them on line. For the most part, I'm as much interested asâ€| Doctor T'Soni, and the rest of you, on figuring out what's going on. We'll get whatever injured on both sides to the hospitals, and see what those ODSTs need. Contradiction, establish a priority line with Captain Lasky.

"Lieutenant Leng, if you bring back our men and if what you say _is _true, then my superiors would most defiantly like to meet with you."

â€|

It took them a while to patch into the UNSC frequency. One particular reason as stated by Contradiction is that the ODSTs were on the Battle Group Dakota communications net, far different from UNSC networks with Forerunner technology without proper clearance. But soon enough they got in.

"This is Lieutenant Chip Dubbo, Deacon 3-4 of _Infinity _ODST group to Commander Palmer! We are pinned down by enemy squids, and cannot move. "Spartan" Miller isn't budging to give us firing support! I have multiple casualties, and do not possess the equipment necessary to take out the AA. Requesting immediate reallocation of any available air support!"

Mark listened on. There was no reply back, just static. The Lieutenant continued. "Goddamn it. Commander Palmer, Colonel Buck, are you there? We are pinned down. We need reinforcements! Sierra-117 is trying to hold them off, but we can't reach our target! He's fully operationalâ€¦ but I don't know, He's fighting, but acting really weird. Vital KIAs, breaking up tactics."

"Did he say Sierra-117?" Lieutenant Banks said.

Some of the others turned from the perimeter. About twenty-five minutes into the standoff, everyone either had their weapon lowered or was sitting down, or both. Marines and sailors turned from the xenos, looked to the captain. Even Tom and Lucy, cloaked in the discipline of Spartan, possibly lied within the shade of ONI, turned around, visors visible to show their unsure faces.

Everyone forgot about Shepard and his crew, and Kai Leng.

"Sirâ€¦ He's alive?" Morganson said. Sitting next to one of the wounded.

The Captain didn't know what to say. Shepard might've said something, but the Captain couldn't make it out. "Yeah, Sierra-117. I don't know if it's him, orâ€¦ something else."

"Sirâ€¦ I'm pretty sure on the news Lord Hood officially retired that specific designation afterâ€¦" She didn't finish the sentence.

"Jesus Christ." One of the wounded said. He tried to get up, pushed down by Shepard's doctor. His face was joyful despite the tremendous pain. "He's hereâ€¦ He's alive. We'reâ€¦ we're all going to be alright!"

Small commotion. Spirits immediately rose with a confused _Normandy _crew standing and watching. Captain Florence couldn't help but be a little happy. Just a small smile as he looked to the men. Sierra-117â€¦ the Master Chief. The thousands of memorials on Earth. It was actually a huge surprise (and some controversy) on naming the _Infinity _anything else but UNSC _Sierra-117_. And now he's hereâ€¦

He survivedâ€¦ after five years. The recent rumors correlating along with whatever the fuck happened with the Installation 03 research station and that strange battle over Earth against God knows who.

All the storiesâ€¦ Even if they were some propaganda machine by ONI, some of it was true. The Captain was present during the First Battle of Earth, after evacuating from Reach aboard the UNSC _Borderlands_. He saw the Chief with the Covenant bomb, single handedly with the aid of naval bombers destroy a Covenant battle cruiser. When the UNSCDF

was falling, the Chief still fought, punching holes in the Covenant and driving them back.

And he can do it againâ€|

â€|

"Shut it, marines. They're in trouble. Dubbo reported they have multiple causalities. Get them on the line." The Captain ordered.

"Wait, wait a second, Captain. Who the hell is Sierra-117?" Shepard said.

One of the marines were already on the line, with him and Contradiction (Lucyâ€|whatever they refer her/him to as) kneeling on the radio.

"Commander, he single handedly saved us all, and now he's in trouble. We can use the _Normandy _and have it act as a Wild Weasel unit, then we can casevac-"

"Captain, hold on. Let's get something straight. I will rescue those men, but I won't have you strong arm me and nearly threaten my crew. I want the same audience with your superiors as you're giving with 'Lieutenant' Leng." Shepard said, sternly, maybe more hostile than usual.

The Captain was silent, staring directly at Shepard. He couldn't tell with what the Captain was doing, thinking of course, but from facial expression alone it was hard to tell. "I thought it was already implied that both of you would have an audience, Commander. Believe me you will once we reach the _Infinity_, _in due time. Our men are on the ground, and they're getting their asses kicked. I ask you to save our men, and it'll give you a decent boost up with my superiors."

The Commander noticed how he at least didn't mention that 'he's the only way they can get to the _Infinity_' or 'you will save our men, or I'll blow the fucking ship up'. That was a small step in a decent direction at least.

Joker announced a few moments beforehand that the transports were taken out. The _Normandy _was a few clicks out of the city, prepping for an excursion into exosphere.

Shepard nodded, then looked to the intercom and spoke. "Joker, belay exospheric entry. We're going to engage a Hades Cannon and help out Captain Florence's men."

"What am I, this guy's taxi driver now? Oh, great. Let's engage an AA with â€| ship. That always ends up well, I'm sure."

â€|

"Deacon 3-4, this is Captain Mark Florence of the UNSC _Legend After_. We've locked in on your channel. We are combat ready and able to provide air support."

Jesus H. Christ. The Captain was still alive. His voice was drowned a

bit in static, but Dubbo could make it out as he buried himself in the dirt of the fox hole with Specialist Amos as whoever was left held the line.

"Oh, thank Christ. Copy that, Cap'in. I'll lock on the AA for your ship. Be advised, danger close. Danger close." Dubbo quickly said.

"WILCO, Deacon. ETA: ten minutes. We are aboard frigate-sized UFO _Normandy_, _I repeat UFO _Normandy_. We will not have ship IFF tags, repeat, no IFF tags. Do not fire open."

"Roger, Deacon out." Dubbo hung up the line. Out of all the people, useless "Spartan" Miller, and a silent Commander Palmer, it was a flyboy helping out the Helljumpers on a UFO, apparently.

"Heads up, incoming air support! Friendly UFO! Danger Close!" Dubbo yelled through the squad comms. "Watch your left, mate!" He yelled to Piper. She responded by digging deeper into the trench, firing her pistol at the avian squid soldiers. Shells dispersed into the air from the magnum, smoking hot and lighting in the rising sun.

Shore their position. That was what they had to do. Piper stabilized the men decently enough, now she helped out with defense. Dubbo looked to the men, seeing shaking arms. So far in fatigue and faces bearing physical pain from tired muscles. And with exhausted breaths with military conditioning only going so far, ammo evaporated shell after shell and clip after clip. Soon enough, they'll have to resort to hand-to-hand combat. And do that against these squid bastards and exhausted men wasn't tactical smart.

Weaponless squids charged the line, supported by avian-like squids and those bug artillery squids. Ultimately, they were barely holding them off. And the horde filled the entire local area. A small sea that ended over the next hill line.

Christ knows how long they can hold out. Defiantly not ten minutes. They had more wounded than abled. Seven wounded, five still able to fight.

The Chief noticed it too. He finally backed down into cover, near Dubbo. He spoke through comms. "Sir, stay down. Get as many wounded out of here. I can hold them off and defend the remaining wounded!"

"Negative Chief, we're with you! We'll hold them off--"

"Sir. With all due respect, the enemy will overrun our position any moment. We've already lost enough men. I'll paint the target while the rest of you escape."

"Chief, I'm ordering that we hold put. Most of those casualties lost are because we kept moving positions--"

Dubbo didn't say it was because of him. It wasn't, really. But in any event, the Lieutenant wasn't sure if the Chief pointed the rifle at him or was just resting it. But Dubbo got the message.

What was going on with the Chief? He wasn't okay. He's stretching his limits. Defend the wounded and hold off a few dozen squids?

"I can hold them off." The Chief said. "We'll use a few of the Spartan Lasers, and open up a path to the east. Take whatever wounded you can. Move from cover to cover."

The Lieutenant didn't know what to doâ€¦ Usually, complete insubordination on the battle fieldâ€¦ was execution without trial. But it was rarely used. Dubbo never had to use it at least; Johnson never had to use it. He never witnessed anyone used itâ€¦

The Chief knew what to do. Despite Dubbo outranking him, the Spartan had decades of experience. And he was a Spartan. They never die. The Chief was literal, living proof of that theory. This wasn't insubordination. He knew what he was doingâ€¦

"â€¦Right, mate. We'll punch a hole, and fall back. Hold 'em off, 'right?" Dubbo said, a shaky smile through the visor.

The Chief nodded, stood up with a Marksmen rifle and began to fire off disciplined shots. He got up from the crater, and pushed forward.

"A'right, mates! We're pulling out. O'Brien, Amos, grab a Spartan Laser and knock out a few squids, we're going to then grab as many of the wounded as we can and pull out. The Chief 'ill defend the rest and paint the AA."

Oddly enough, Spartan Lasers weren't actually lasers but some controlled projectile with a light castor. A controlled burst from O'Brien that ripped through one squid and the splash damage knocked down a few others.

"Why the fuck are we pulling out!?" Lieutenant Mickey called out

"What the hell are we doing?" O'Brien yelled as he ducked into the crater next to Dubbo from oncoming fire.

"We've already lost too many men, and we don't know the blast radius of the UFO's weapons!"

"Fuck me!" O'Brien replied, dropping the sniper rifle and heading towards the weapons cache to grab a Laser.

"Piper, prep the wounded for movement!" O'Brien, aim for the bug squids! Once they won't have covering fire, we'll punch that hole!"

He complied, started aiming at artillery. Dubbo looked up, firing off the assault rifle as orb after orb passed him by, every once and a while a round hit and absorbed by his shields. That's one of the reasons he joined up with the ODSTs. Being shot hurts a hell of a lot less.

They peeled off one squid at a time. Prioritizing nearest squids and leaving the covering fighters to the Chief.

"Sir. Some of the wounded are able to move." Piper reported, digging into the crater right next to Dubbo. "Do you even know where we're running to?"

_Good question, Corpsman. _Dubbo opened up the tactical display on his helmet. From their whole route, there's a trench maybe about sixty meters away. Emptied, and running along to UNSC pseudo-territory.

Dubbo relayed the information, and Piper seemed to acknowledge.

"O'Brien, Mickey, Amos, grab the wounded! Piper and I will provide covering fire! Prep to make an exit!"

Spartans never dieâ€¦ The Chief's been in worse before. The Lieutenant saw the massing squids. Mostly unarmed, human-like zombies charging like idiots and being gunned down. But, with larger numbers they might final pose a threatâ€¦

"Dubbo, the Chief can only take so much. Why the fuck are we leaving?" O'Brien said through the comms.

"Sirâ€¦" Piper said. "O'Brien's right! Moving the wounded is too risky. While they're stable to move I don't know how much more damage they'll take." A red and black explosion rung near her position, setting the grass to flame and raining dirt upon the entire platoon.

The Chief fired off enemies in their direction, and from what Dubbo could tell the hole's been opened.

But he could see the squidsâ€¦ could see with all the cross fire that they can't make it to the trench without casualties.

The Chiefâ€¦ Christ, they can't move that fast with the wounded. He couldn't hold them off.

It had to be called off. There wasn't any wayâ€¦ The Chief knew what he was doingâ€¦

"Sir! You okay?" Piper said, dug in next to him.

There was barely a hole. He already got a lot of men killed by moving because the Chiefâ€¦

He didn't have to make the hard decision. The explosion did that for him.

8. Division

****Surface of garden world****

****2557 Military Calendar, 11:38****

****_Fifty-six minutes after drop_****

No one even had to paint the target. This _Normandy_, whatever it was, made a low sweeping pass. The squid AA was still standing, barely. Holes covered the foundational legs, and it was leaning, on the verge of falling.

The AA however, was still able to move, directing the weapon to the _Normandy. _The ship moved by, forcing down Dubbo and the other ODSs. It rose towards the sky, engines in full view. It made a wide arc, quickly turned around unlike the bulky UNSC frigates.

The Chief didn't even bother to look at the full ship. He continued to dodge orb after orb and round after round. Dozens of squids assaulted his position, barely able to hold them off. Shields were unable to recharge to full capacity, sequence constantly interrupted by a stray orb or nearby explosion. This forced him to hide within the craters, moving when there were too many enemies. Near the outlying craters held short-range weapons, shotguns SMGs, and so on, while the interior craters had long-range weapons. Even with craters falling one by one, the weapons were safe for the Chief to use when he pushed back. The squids didn't even bother to touch them, just trampling over the things as they charged on against a single individual.

Then there was the center crater, with the few wounded men. Those who were semi-abled held onto magnums just in case if the line was pushed too far back.

Most of the artillery bugs were taken out by the Spartan Lasers from Dubbo's squad. The majority of the confrontations were weapon-less squids, idiotically charging in groups to only meet lead fire; big-mouths, blindly firing in short bursts while the avian-like weapon-holding squids provided fire discipline. The avian squids seem to be squad commanders, giving what seemed like orders and trying to organize men.

No surprise from the squids to take so much effort and resources to defeat a single Spartan. That was something shocking. From the rebels years before, it was fear, and from the Covenant, it was either panic from the grunts, an odd respect from the elites, or anger from the brutes. Here, they said nothing and continued to die without any alteration to tactics.

Chatter began on the comms. "This is Captain Florence to Deacon 3-4, we can't get a clear shot with the AA right on our asses! Can you call in other support to take it out while we distract it?"

"Copy that, stand by!" Dubbo called back, he immediately switched to _Infinity _wavelengths. "Spartan Miller, I need immediate air support, _now_! I don't give a shit how useless you want to be. The AA is distracted, so it's the only chance we got of taking it out!"

Dubbo- The Chief was able to hold off the squids. The Lieutenant was right in the fact that they had too many causalities. They had to get out of here and pull out. He handled worse. It was the right thing to do, Dubbo just wouldn't listen. Dubbo didn't want to- But it was the correct choice. The Chief could work alone; he'd done it before. The ODSs, the marines, while helpful at points, overall only slowed him down-

But you had something they didn't. Something no one saw- but me.

He could barely see the ODSs in the distance, holding their position instead of retreating. Trying to support the Chief when he didn't

need it. The Chief lost track of mind, losing count of how many squids he killed. No bodies to pile up, to use as cover. Just ash piles that quickly dissolved with the rain. It might've been five minutes, five days, five years. It didn't matter. Time just seemed to be as irrelevant as the raindrops.

It was completely subconscious. Decades of experience, guiding every step and every round fired. Where to take position, and when to move when hostilities were too great. Whether to reload or simply throw the weapon away for another.

The flow of the mind was interrupted when Spartan Miller came online. "Copy, Deaconâ€¦ let me talk to Commander Palmer, uhâ€¦"

"We don't have time goddamn it!" Dubbo immediately responded.

Another wave of battles back and forth on the comms. The Chief paid no attention. A big-mouth tried to get the jump on him, only to meet lead shells of a marksmen rifle.

Another face came online. The Chief saw that it was Commander Palmer's. "Spartan Miller, what the hell have you been doing all this time sitting on your ass on the _Infinity?_"

The Chief fired down on another group of weapon-less squids. The marksmen rifle was dry, threw it away and grabbed a battle rifle ready and waiting from another crater nearby. Three round bursts. One squid at a time, moved on to the next.

He's shields broke down when one of the avian-squids threw some type of grenade. He was fully exposed. A few orbs began to scrape off the metal armor, heating the metals.

"Commander, I have no available fighter support. If-"

"Get the hell off the line, Miller. If I knew the situation was this badâ€¦ I've got a few Wild Weasel units on station; I'm reallocating them to your command, Lieutenant. Be advised, once the AA is down, Captain Lasky will be moving in the _Paris_-class frigateUNSC _13__th__ Disciple _to provide firebase and army deployment."

The Chief threw his weapon at a big-mouth when the clip was dry. It only stunned him for a moment, where the Chief tackled him to the ground, nearly tearing his face apart. Stopped by the body beginning to turn to ashes.

"Chief! Grab whatever wounded you can, get the hell out of there! Short Swords are inbound with payload armed for bear! _Get out of there_!" Dubbo yelled on the comms.

Shields began to slowly regenerate, and then interrupted again by a stray orb. The _Normandy _made another pass, barely dodging an AA beam. It fired off some sort of missile, missing its target and only traveled towards the city skyline.

One weaponless squid tried to jump on him; the Chief turned around and grabbed his arm. The human-like squid seemed to almost bite him. It was thrown off, trying to regain itself. Another squid jumped on him, forcing the Chief to turn and nearly rip off an arm.

Can you guess? Luck.

"Jesus Christ, Chief! Get the fuck out!" Someone on the comms screamed. The Chief couldn't tell whose voice it was.

A few squids a bit farther out were taken out by UNSC yellow lights from the wounded. The Chief looked over to the wounded crater. It seemed the squids were passing them by, ignoring them and focusing on the Chief.

So that was their moreâ€¦ human response to a Spartan. Focus all efforts, ignore everything else.

Another five weaponless squids tried to charge, all pounced on him, completely covering him. There were maybe eight or nine of them altogether. Shields were broken through, and they began to claw at the metal components. He could still stand, hard to move. He used one arm and smashed in the face of one squid. The other squids couldn't provide covering fire. The big-mouths saw that, and either joined in with the pile or cut through their allies to reach the Chief.

He could mostly see. He was in a crouching position, in the middle of a crater. He felt one claw grab the edge of his arm plate, using the grip to try and rip it off. He saw on the HUD that one of the squids unpinning a grenade on his belt. The Chief used his free arm, smashing through multiple squids. He took the grenade, and threw it.

The squids took most of the explosion. However, the Chief felt the shock wave. He spit out a small wave of blood, splattered within the internal helmet.

"Stand by, Deacon. This is Wild Weasel, Righteous 1-1, target in sight. Keep the thing occupied. We're coming in low and hot." A pilot said over the comms.

The Chief was forced to the ground. He grabbed the leg of a big-mouth, crushed its ankle within his grip and tossed it onto the ground. He crawled to it, ripped the squid's face apart to only biomass. The squid who gripped his metal armor finally made progress; he felt the gear given way. Small gaps between the underlay connectors and the metal.

One of them grabbed his helmet, trying to force it off. His chin and mouth pressed against the glass and metal. He felt claws around his neck, trying to pierce through the underlays. He could still breathe normally. He forced his head back down, possessing a lot more strength than the squid ever hoped to achieve.

Another shock wave due to another pass from the _Normandy_. This time, what followed were the loud subsonic sounds of Short Sword bombers.

"Short Swords inbound!" The pilot yelled on the comms.

"EVERYONE HIT THE DECK!" Someone yelled.

Immediately after he said that, Chief saw the atmospheric bomber dropping a precision payload. He could hear the AA collapsing, legs giving way. One last beam of light that only charred a nearby hill,

cutting a direct hole, vibrating the entire earth.

Yet again, a third shockwave passed through, bringing forth another round of blood that dripped through his nose and poured down his mouth.

The shield warning still sounded off. His face was nearing the dirt. He felt his ankle plate ripped off. A hand pushed under the shoulder guards.

Sounds of cheering, quickly halted.

Another pair of hands dry to dig under his helmet. He felt metallic fingers cut up his chin.

Was I wrong?

They hand went limp. Faded away, and left only ash that mixed with the pouring groups of squids blocking his vision were put on the ground by shotgun rounds, turned to ashes. Squids quickly removed. He saw one pulled off by an ODS - Carol was it? - thrown to the ground and finished off from the assault rifle Amos was holding.

The Chief looked up to the face of Dubbo through the visible ODS visor. His face was odd. Something like before, when the Chief suggested using the trench. It was this unsureness, possibly. Why though?

"Christ, mateâ€¦ Never thought I'd be the one saving you!" Dubbo said. His face slowly returned to normal, calm and laid back. "Bombers took out the 'lot of them. Barely any of the buggers left."

The Chief didn't say anything, standing up from the pile of ashes. He nodded, looked around to the fleeing squids. A few ODSs turned on them, while Carol tended toâ€¦ whatever wounded were left in the middle crater.

Overall, the fight was over.

A few others gathered around, Mickey, Carol, Amos.

"This is Captain Mark Florence, we'll let the _Disciple_ take the reins from here. We'll be making contact with the _Infinity_, Florence out." Comms reported.

The _Normandy_ made one last pass, turned its nose towards the sky and disappeared within the rain clouds. The rain began to pour down even harder now. Puddles that dissolved and combined with the ashes. Fires battling against the water. However, a few small slices of light made it through.

Afterwards, another voice came on air. "This is Captain Andrew Wigen of the UNSC _13__th__ Disciple_, stand by. We're making a pass by in upper troposphere, then heading back to exosphere. Deploying firebases near your coordinates."

More and more voices came online. Dozens of officers coordinating orders, organizing a major ground force able to take control of this planet. Establishing UNSC footholds, creating frequencies, and

organizing men.

The ground rumbled for what seemed like the millionth time today. The _Paris_-class flew by, RCS engines struggling to keep it afloat as it arced above the ground. Dozens of droppods flew off, carrying firebases in their cargo holds. They dropped down like rocks, activating engines at the last moment. Slowly descending to the surface to suitable base deployment zones. Unlatching the firebase, and flying back to exosphere. The doors of the base opened, releasing hundreds of army soldiers supported by Scorpion tanks and Cobras. All of the ground infantry in breather helmets to reduce possible biological risks.

"Army mongrels. Ain't Really Marines Yet." Dubbo said, laughing at his own joke. He looked to the Chief, as if expecting some response. He didn't say anything.

"Hey, I was army, sir." Carol said.

"Oui. Feel sorry for 'ya, Corpsman."

A few Falcons made their way over the hills. They landed near their position, with Spartan-IVs in one Falcon and ODSTs in another. They spread about, and secured the area from whatever squids were left. Commander Palmer and Colonel Buck stepped out of the nearest Falcon, ducking down to avoid rotating blades.

"Took you long enough." Palmer began. She took her helmet off, held it at her side. So much for biological containments. She looked into the sky, letting the rain mat her hair and fall down her face. She turned back to the group "You were the last ones to destroy your target. I thought you Spartan-IIs were supposed to be superheroes? We were able to take theirs down even with those one-hundred sixty meter squids."

"We ran into some complications." The Chief said. He kicked whatever small piles of ashes were left.

Palmer nodded. "â€|Right. Enough complications where the flyboys had to save your ass. Wait until the marines hear that one."

"Hey, wellâ€|" Dubbo began. He had his helmet off, revealing sandy blonde hair. "At least save the world _once_, then you can start talking shit."

"Right, ladies, if I can interrupt this fascinating conversation, we have a few situations on our hands." Colonel Buck interjected. "We've secured our areas, and we're ready to advance on the city. I guess Captain Florence and his men already got out on whatever the hell that thing was, so we don't have to worry about them. Marine Force Recon will stay and advance forward. But Captain Lasky needs you guys back shipside, ASAP. Whatever the hell is on that ship, is soon going to be on the _Infinity_, and he needs the best guys he has aboard."

Aboard SSV **_Normandy_, _****seventy kilometers above Illium surface, 2186 Citadel Calendar, 11:41**

In the span of around three hours, the certainty of scientific law, and historical absolutes and themes was turned upside down.

But, thousands of new avenues were open that can only be continued with inquiry. The Elites and their accompany species, and thisâ€¦ new branch of humanity was equally no less thanâ€¦

Frightening. From the moment that Admiral Hackett explained the little information they had on this first contact, Liara had only fear installed into her. And it only grew, into anxiety, into this odd sense ofâ€¦ She didn't know.

Captain Florenceâ€¦ Diving under this mask of hostility to hide, what she saw was the same amount of fear and unsureness as her and the rest of the crew. Fear of what was behind her, what this "xeno" race could do to this beloved UNSC (as if she could do anything to truly hurt them). If anyone should fear, it should only be them. The Asari, the Turians, the Quariansâ€¦ the Reapers. She saw what Mark was willing to do, use weapons of mass destruction without a single thought of consequence. Fifty-three ships within the solar system. More than the largest navies combined. And the _Shadow of Intent_ and _Infinity_, the largest ships the galaxy has ever seen, able to withstand internal, normal gravitational atmosphere which would've destroyed most other ships. Certainly something like the _one_kilometer_Dreadnaught_-class.

And eight-hundred colonies. Far more than every known habitable planet (known to them) combined. Thatâ€¦ has to be an over-exaggeration. In the thousands of years of space travel available to the Asari, they only settled a few dozen worlds, none of them exceeding one-billion. It would be pure luck to find a solar system through astronomic observation, and years to mathematically calculate a planet within said solar system, if not find it through observation already.

But from a practical standpoint, it would take a vast amount of resources to build this many ships. Unable to obtain the materials from a single or handful of planets. If they had eight-hundred colonies, how many _actual_ planets did they own, only usable as resource depots? Because at some point over-industrialization would lead to a collapse ecosystem, so on and so forth, but from pure uninhabitable worlds with a vast amount of resource, it became clear with the vastness of their fleet.

Captain Florence turned to the Commander, hands on hips. "AA is down. UNSC is moving in with full force. Iâ€¦ thank you, Commander, for helping our men.

"Wellâ€¦" Florence said, before Shepard could speak. "Contradiction, get me a secure link. Contact Captain Lasky, send him everything. Threat assessments and reports. Tell him the situation, and for the _Infinity_ not to open fire."

"I can provide communication, if you wish." EDI said.

"That won't be necessary. We have our own line, thanks." Florence responded.

"Alsoâ€¦" Leng added. "My transports are in route with your men. If you can tell them not to open fire."

From what Kai Leng was doing so far, those transports won't be loaded

with Cerberus marines, but what he actually says. UNSC casualties. To have an ally like the UNSC would be a large boon to anyone who yields it.

That was what she was worried about. She hasn't really seen the true nature of the UNSC. Not yet. But from the actions she witnessed, they might not condemn Cerberus' actions.

While Cerberus destroyed their own humanity for what they saw as a greater good, the Citadel and the rest of the galaxy for that matter did think about what would happen afterwards.

Captain Florence nodded to Contradiction. The see-through visor still remaining creepily motionless. This Contradiction— Liara didn't know what it is; neither did the rest of the crew. It defiantly wasn't an AI. Even EDI, a highly advance AI, required a massive computer room. And the data transferred between her mobile platform and the computer room was in the zettabytes. It was impossible to compress so many files onto a single drive the size of Lucy.

Tactical advisor, some other squad mate speaking on the comms., a voice of their imaginations, an alternate personality of the soldier? So far, the rest of Mark's soldiers just followed his lead, barely interacting with Shepard or the rest of the crew. But Contradiction proves, useful at times coupled with this unavoidable, questionable irritation. Whatever, he, she, it was, is able to provide helpful information on a whim. Liara could only deduce that this is some sort of operator working in a safe location, where is unknown. Defiantly not on the Legend After.

"This Captain Lasky, what role does he exactly play?" Liara said, moving from the subject.

"Captain Thomas J. Lasky is the commanding officer of the UNSC Infinity. And within the Navy, bigger ship means bigger power." Contradiction responded.

"And—" The Captain added. "He'll be the one you'll want to take about an alliance with, Shepard, Leng. Or at least, help lead you to the right guy without any 'bullshit'."

"Captain Lasky isn't your leader, nor is he a representative of some type." Liara said. "From what I've gathered, I thought this Lord Hood was your leader? At least of your military branch."

"Fleet Admiral Lord Hood. And yes, he is our leader."

"Then why don't you take us to your leader?"

Contradiction snorted, trying to hold in laughter. Captain Florence only glared at him—her, turned immediately back to Liara. "Lord Hood is the supreme commander of the UNSC. As such, whether you meet him or not won't be up to me. But for security purposes, you probably won't be seeing him for a while.

"Captain Lasky can clear you up. Either way, you'd probably have an easier time with him then with Lord Hood."

"Why's that?" Shepard said. "I think we've seen the worst it so

far."

A little joke. Shepard smiled, and so did Florence after a moment. "I'll admit I've been an asshole and I've asked a lot from your crew. But it's protocol, and whether you agree or not, it's understandable. From what I know of Lasky, he's more open than me, or the rest of the UNSC in particular. He'll put in a good word."

So either make some sort of progress with Captain Lasky, or reach another concrete wall like what Florence has put up, where Shepard would again have to dig right through it again.

"That's vague." Shepard said.

"And that's all I know about him. I'm sorry, Commander. Can't help you much." He shrugged.

Great. Perfect.

Another monotonous task, in some sort of odd retrospect. She suddenly felt exhausted. Already worn out from the events on the Qurian home world. Slapped in the face with a new contact, a eezo singularity thrown right at her with the crash landing. And then slapped in the face again when these new contacts were a new species. Then thrown to the ground when the other contacts were the same species met before. At least there's some connection for their existence. "Forerunners", had to be Protheans. They span the galaxy; they could've transported species across planets. But no eezo influence as the Reapers have planned. And they called their planet Earth, there

She wondered what had they gone through to build all this?

At some point, cultural recombination occurs to every space-faring or about-to-space-fare species. Where one dominant culture become ever more present and begins to greatly influence other cultures, and eventually become one in the same. Earth had experienced this in the late twentieth century, where the "Western" culture became dominant through global power and increasing communications. And at some point after recombination, the species might pave into one government. But that was the optional part.

The Asari had experienced this without unification. The Turians with unification. The Krogans...without unification. The Salarrians with unification. Humanity with unification. And Asari are slowly becoming the cultural dominant within the galaxy, with all species adopting some form of their culture and acknowledging them as the most advance race in the galaxy. Yet no one was looking to become a single government.

The reason why their fleets would be "considered" small, is because it was only meant for guards and patrols, not a full-scale war like this one. They were at peace, no need for such drastic ships like the Infinity...

There she goes again. Only interrupted by a rolling headache. Exhaustion's right. She barely had time to get a bite to eat the more she thought about it.

Then again, Shepard probably took it worse. Liara was always able, at least in the past couple years, to simplify loses, to a certain extent. Shepard, however, well

"So what of my companions?" Shepard said.

"I've already stated what the protocol was about a million times now. Thank God that decision will be up to Captain Lasky." Florence said.

Liara didn't like what she heard in that tone. Spitefulness, frustration. She felt only a sudden dismay of this Captain Lasky. She heard Lasky on the comms. once, and from what little she could tell on her own he seemed enthusiastic and charismatic at the least.

Captain Florence's comms. ranged. He opened up the channel, and the same charismatic voice played through.

â€

Out of all the things that Humanity has experienced in the past approximate thirty-five years, this was the strangest to say the least.

When the Priority XXX-X Directive message came through, it in itself was already a shockâ€ Well, at least Captain Lasky wasn't the only one breaking First Contact Protocol.

Humanity. Aboard their ships. Lasky had already consulted Roland, fed him the same reports he received both from Captain Tanner and Florence. Constantly analyzing, reevaluating. So far, Forerunner involvement, of course. And it wouldn't be a first true encounter with other Humans. On Requiem, within the Master Chief's reports, the Prometheans were ancient Humans turned by the Composer.

So what was it this time? Another Shield World where they grew up? Possibly. It would be believable, but within Captain Florence's reports there was something disturbing that put this into question.

Earth. They called their homeworld Earth. Their ship, the _Normandy_. Historical references to homeworld. Commander Shepard, Lieutenant Leng, and their respective crews holding a culture and military structure extremely similar to the UNSC.

And the xenos knew the location. Knew where Earth was. Cole Protocolâ€ technically broken.

And they wanted an audience, an alliance to fight theseâ€ Reapers. Captain Florence had to strike what essentially was a bargain to save the lives of UNSC soldiers for a possible alliance. Lasky wasn't even sure how to maneuver through this. He already did far too much, far beyond his position.

But they had another problem already. A _minor_ problem, for Christ's sake. The Captain of the _Cairo_ was already dead when the marines and Spartans arrived. The highest ranking military official was this Captain Anaya, a xeno. Another one to talk to, waiting in line essentially. They had about three-hundred xeno civilians, a decent

amount wounded with various injuries. They didn't know their physiology. And with the injured men coming from the planet surface, they had to prioritize supplies. Of course, since regular medical treatment couldn't be use on xenos, the moral dilemma was easy to solve for the moment. Lasky ordered his security chief Major Jake Reynolds to try and make the civilians comfortable, help out the wounded to the extent of their abilities. Let's hope biofoam is universal to all species

Lasky looked to the holo-table. And another situation report. Hoorah. Admiral Alvares' Ninth Fleet finally arrived, one-hundred twenty-five ships in total. _Marathon_, _Paris_ and _Stalwart_, a few _Halcyon_ cruisers, and even a _Phoenix_-class carrier ship to provide fighter, medical, and ground support, all lead by a _Valiant_-class super-heavy cruiser.

They took control of the three-dimensional geometrical territories and elliptical orbital patterns Battle Group Dakota has already taken. The _Infinity_ sat back with the Fleet with the _Poseidon_-class carriers with needed refit and refuel. The ship was in a passive, polar, elliptical orbit about two-million clicks away from the solar system's ringed gas giant that laid about forty-million clicks from the God's Key.

Soon enough, he'll have to report to the Admiral for what he's down. He'll have to talk to t_hem _too. It's justâ€¦|

"Roland, send a timeline report to the Admiral. Then respond to the horn from Captain Florence." Lasky said.

Roland only solemnly nodded, sent out the report and activated the comm. link. A small holographic figure of Captain Florence appeared on the table. He stood at attention, saluting the Captain. Lasky returned it back.

Roland was able to pinpoint this SSV _Normandy_, about seven million clicks and closing. A small ship. According to Roland, the ship was giving off no heat of any sorts, nearly impossible to pick up on the infrared and invisible in the coldness of space. But they could easily switch to radar. Unlike the UNSC's stealth ships where light-wave particles were unable to bounce off the atoms of the ship and return to the user since, wellâ€¦| it's invisible, the _Normandy_ is still visible to the naked eye. A major design flaw at the least within the stealth system. If someone didn't have radar all they'd have to do is look out the window.

He looked at the _Normandy_'s ship. Beautiful girl, Lasky will give them that. And of course, ever present was the binary black hole that surrounded all these ships.

"Captain Florence, good to know we didn't have to spend hours searching in the shit to find you." Lasky said.

"Likewise, Skipper." Florence said. He stood at ease. Another figure appeared, a A.I. avatar in blue jeans, a white T-shirt, curly hair matted under a hat with some logo of a sports team that no longer existed. "You understand the situation then?"

"For the most of it. Protocol doesn't extend to this matter. This part would be left to a civilian government, which is

currentlyâ€|"

"Not present." The ship A.I., Contradiction said.

"Exactly. But, you sure are maneuvering like a politician, Florence. All of the sudden, I'm receiving a couple humans with obvious conflicting ideals and their xeno crew in exchange for transport and medical care?" Lasky said, a little accusative. But it was deserved. All of this wasâ€| a little stressful to say at the very least.

And Florence responded with defense. "I understand, Skipper, that this is waaay beyond protocol. Yet Shepard's crew saved countless ODSs and marines on the ground. Full trust? Hell no. But they want to talk about further diplomatic relationships."

"Anything like that would be up to HIGHCOM, not me. You and I both know that. And, if HIGHCOM would _want_ to talk to anyone, it would be with the Humans."

"Understood. But these are Humans, and the UNSC only exists for the defense of Humanity, Earth, and all her colonies. HIGHCOM will want a word. Denying protection to human lives is unimaginable."

"Captain Florence, you're in a dangerous position. I understand why you're doing this, but from HIGHCOM's point of view, this is aiding a "enemy". Having ONI has an enemy for whatever reason is bad enough, but HIGHCOM doesn't screw around."

Contradiction spoke. "Aye, aye, skipper, but we had no choice. We were forced aboard their ship under circumstances. We may have this ship under control with the nukes, but we have no idea of the full extent of their capabilities. We have multiple wounded marines and sailors aboard who need medical attention and are running out of time. They're the only way to the _Infinity_."

"Soâ€| you're saying you're being held hostage?" Lasky said. A dumb question, yet from the way he made the situation sound likeâ€|

"No, Skipper." Captain Florence, sternly and with officer authority.

After some thought, Lasky spoke. "Alright. I'll send the message up to Lord Hood. I'll speak with them, once their aboard. I want to meet this Commander Shepard and Lieutenant Leng face to face. Either way, we might need their expertise."

"Skipper?" Florence said.

"We're pretty tight on space as it is. Dock in hanger fourteen. I'll have these _Cerberus_ transports dock in hanger two. Let's see if we can come up with a solution toâ€|all of this.

"Also, Skipper, understand that we have to enforce Contact Protocol. Be prepared for that." Lasky said, a little distaste. He'll stop it immediately after. It's only to show goodwill to the marines that their safety matters.

Florence looked a little perplexed, then merely nodded. With that, the holograms disappeared. Lasky turned to Roland.

"Well, I guess I should be there welcoming party, shouldn't I?" Lasky said.

"Are you sure that's a good idea, sir? This is a relatively new species. Letting their ship dock with the _Infinity _is already risk enough. So far, the squids' cybernetic capabilities are only growing, we have an unknown amount of assailants within the _Normandy _that could be a security threat to this crew, and as Contradiction said, we have no idea of their true capabilities. Hell, we have no idea how to account for biological contaminants" Roland said, straight from the book.

"I understand, Roland. But Captain Florence and his men are already in their possession. They seem friendly enough. At some point, we have to stop aiming a rifle directly in their face. Don't worry, I'll have a security team with me. And Captain Florence has two Spartan-IIIs under his command if the situation gets that bad.

"Speaking of whichâ€¦" Lasky looked to Roland, who only nodded and pulled up crew manifests and limited access ONI databanks. "What did you find?"

Roland returned the gloomy tone. "ONI's locked up tight. Even to the damn Navy. But, these guys were defiantly not on the crew manifest. Lieutenant Banks was on. Odd for a Great War veteran to be placed in a trivial station."

The Captain nodded. From Contradiction's reports, the AI personally asked the Captain to try and investigate. Two Spartans, stowaways on a friendly vessel. Somehow conveniently nearby the God's Key location to be pulled by ONI. And Lieutenant Banks. Served with the Chief on Earth. But, as Lasky looked more deeply into marine records, it became shadier, with some documents even sanitized.

As for the _Legend After _and their tour, the Navy set their own route. It wouldn't be a first ONI would slither under the Navy. But this time they've gone too far. They knew about the God's Key. Before the Elites, and before the Navy. Yetâ€¦did they know what was on the other side?

If they did, then they've risked Earth and Humanity by doing this. Admiral Osmanâ€¦, HIGHCOM only has one punishment for this sort of thing.

"And Captain Florence? It isn't a coincidence a guy on ONI's blacklist is in charge of this whole thing." Lasky said.

"Captain Mark Angelettie Florence." Roland started. "Graduated from United Nations Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland. First tour on Reach as a Junior Lieutenant aboard the UNSC _George Patton. _Then ultimately tried to survive the clusterfuck of a military defensive. Ship was scuttled, force to ground. His CO died with the scuttle, and his XO died from injuries. Under wartime law, he was promoted to Lieutenant Commanderâ€¦ Showed a lot of valiant effort as he helped organized evacuation efforts despite Code Omega-Three being given by Reach Commandâ€¦ blah, blah, blah. Partook in the defense of Earthâ€¦ Under wartime and catastrophic emergency laws, he was jumped to Captainâ€¦ Valiant effort bringing down a Covenant battle cruiserâ€¦ blah, blah. Chose to stay with the Navy. Served as outer territory

guard patrol, near Elite territoryâ€|Again, very strange for a vet of the War. Actually reason why he's blacklisted isâ€| sanitized by ONI.

"Why wouldn't it?" Lasky said, quietly. "He sure works for those promotions doesn't he?"

The Captain smiled, but it was understandable. Within the first years of the war (the years where Lasky was part of), replacements, were of course, young, newly trained recruits or transfers from reserve units. It was mostly observed in the marines however. Chances are if you have to have a naval replacement, the entire crew was also dead along with them. In any event, as the war raged on, as the UNSC lost more and more, colonies fallen along with entire fleets, as the reserves dried up, the replacements were older. Honorably discharged veterans whether redrafted or volunteered, conscripted men who were poorly trainedâ€| and when it was at its worse, the dishonorable discharged, civilian militia members, police officers, teenagers and old men and women, or sometimes none at all.

"Well, he gets the job doneâ€| I guess." Roland said.

"Right. What about Lieutenant Dubbo's team? Have they made it shipside?" Lasky said.

"Aye, aye, sir. Along with the Master Chief."

"Good. Peel off one of Commander Palmer's Fireteam Majestic. Have the Chief and Palmer's Spartan team act as the security team for me. Just to ease your mind."

Roland nodded. Fully understanding. That was the problem with these new Spartans. They had no clear chain of command, almost organized like the Soviet Russian army during World War II. No real structure except that the Commissar is in charge. And of course, a Captain of a ship would have to completely restructure it him/herself. Immediately ban calling each other "Spartan Whatever", and actually address by rank, or by sir/ma'am if a grunt to an officer. Build up these individual squads into actual platoons, then companies, then battalions and so on. Reinstall a naval culture into them instead of this idiotic ONI parade. Even with Spartan-IIs and IIIs being an ONI project mostly, at least they only had a single goal in those days. Unlike this murky vision of Spartan-IVs. Or this murky vision as the UNSC began dividing more and more.

But not all of these new Spartans were bad. Commander Palmer and men under her direct command are trusted. It was just the former ONI operatives.

"What's the status on those slip-space beacons?" Lasky said, moving away from the thoughts.

"Still inoperable at the moment. We're working on it." Roland reported.

"Have the _Salvation_ make an immediate trip through the God's Key. Send a briefing to HIGHCOM on everything. Fleet status, these new contacts, ONI theories, _everything_. Try to get Lord Hood to come out here. ASAP. Our objectives are almost complete."

"Aye, aye, sir."

â€|

The _Infinity _was like the other UNSC ships. Bulky and tall. But it was more elegantly designed. No RCS engines within sight. Tanks spread across the side-hulls with an upper-hull metal coating that looked like a shield. Carvings of thousands of different systems interrupted by the white lights of hangers that shone like a beacon in the darkness. Hull lights displayed the name of the ship proudly in letters larger than the _Normandy_. The symbol of the black eagle painted near the front of the ship, near four large holes that served as the ship's main cannons. The grey hull engulfed nearly the entire view. Liara couldn't see the end of the ship.

Finally, after what seemed like a lifetime, Shepard and his crew finally made it to the UNSC _Infinity_. EDI sent mass-weight (within one atmosphere) and external ship structural reports to make docking accommodations aboard. The ship was slowed to about twenty kph, slowly guided by tug boats and fighter escort. Large ships that resemble triangles with engines near the back. They stayed still, retro-burn RCS-engines maintaining their position.

A glowing grey light that was separated by blue shield. But Liara could see the hundreds of workers bustling inside like ants. Dozens of transports loaded and unloaded, with ships, supplies, and troops moving up and down loading ramps. Cargo moving about. A large section only occupied with runway marshallers.

"_Infinity _actual, stand by. Slowing cruising speed down to ten clicks. Pitch in perfection. Roll perfection. Yaw, readjusting by one point five meters." Joker reported.

"Roger that, _Normandy_. Uhâ€|, clamps are ready and adjusted for external structure."

Liara finally noticed more figures near the marshallers. Dozens of armed personnel with similar weapons to Mark and his soldiers. Pure white and red armor.

Another negotiation. This time with about a few dozen weapons pointed right at their face onboard a ship with thousands of troops, with a single misspoken word rewarded with immediate death.

â€|Actually, just like anytime, really, now that Liara thought about it. But, she had hoped something a little bit different from Captain Lasky in contrast to Captain Florence. More accepting, she thought he said. Florence did constantly repeat that this is protocol. So, hopefully they won't force Shepard and his crew to get on their knees and surrender, or what not.

She began to notice unmoving individuals as the ship got closer. Dozens of them, hands in surrender and on their knees. Surrounded by soldiers as if they were prisoners.

The ship finally passed through the blue shields, and got a clear view of the prisoner area. They did not look well at all. Injured and horrendous wounds. Children frightened. Blood on the floor. Theyâ€|

By the Goddess, they were Asari. Turian. Batarians. All of them, non-humans.

When she first witnessed Mark's degradation of Liara and Tali, she thought it only a minor thing. Maybe it was the circumstances of the situation, forcing her away from investigating the matter more closely for what it truly was. This was absolute dehumanization of Citadel species. They weren't people, they were animals.

But she didn't see this within Mark and his soldiers. Not to this great of depth at least. Maybe it had to do with Shepard's intervention, and the mere presence of Ashley and James, and the rest of the human crew. As she thought about, Florence did have some unsubtle facial expression when anyone else other than Shepard or Leng spoke. Disgust and anxiousness. It could be hindsight bias clouding her memories, but the observation came more vivid as she thought on.

The Normandy settled down near the right end of the hanger, with the wings nearly clipping the wall. Magnetic clamps packed in tightly. About five of them overall, three on the hanger wall and two on an adjacent ramp portside.

"Jesus, if this place was packed more tightly we'd be sardines." Joker said. He finally looked over to where Liara was staring at, noticing the civilians within two rows. All of them on their knees, hands behind them in blue-holographic cuffs, heads looking to the floor with riflemen roaming the prison perimeter. His eyes widened "Oh my God. Commander! You're going to want to see this!"

Shepard was in the QEC comm. room, about to file a report with Admiral Hackett. Liara, and Shepard had to move to the CIC to reflect essentially, and oversee reports. But, it was mostly to catch a breath themselves. Captain Florence's and Lieutenant Leng's crews were left alone with the rest of the "xenos", watched by the security teams and EDI, who'll report immediately if there's any trouble.

The Commander came running out of the comms. Liara finally just realized how hard he was pushing himself. A face on the verge of falling asleep with skin embedded with oil and reeking of dried sweat. He was limping, right leg taking short strides. Blast marks across the armor that needed to be clean, with slight deformities in the curtain metals that indicated bruises or other bodily injuries.

Shepard told her about the N7 program, the grueling training that was primarily adopted from the British Special Air Services. The mental games the instructors would play on them to instill the growth of self-doubt to break them with the constant physical training the breached their limits. The torture during advanced special operations SERE training.

According to him, he was trained to handle it.

He got to the cockpit, looked to the pilot.

"What's wrong?" He said.

"That." Joker simply said, pointing to the Illium people.

He turned to the prisoners and his face became that old glare that Liara and the rest of the crew knew all too well. He slowly looked to the prisoners one last time, saw one look up and in shock to find the _Normandy _here. The Turian's head was physical forced down by a guard. Shepard turned around and whatever sort of physical injuries he gained were all of the sudden gone.

Liara followed, trying to keep pace as he stormed to the elevator. "Shepard, I know what you're thinking. We have to think about our relationship with the UNSC right now. It's already fragile as it is, something like this would-"

"You saw their condition."

"Shepard, Those could be injuries from the Reapers. They wouldn't know how to treat their injuries."

"And leave them on the deck, doing nothing?" He grabbed on a weapon block, forming into a Mattock. He rushed by the galaxy map, with a frightened Specialist Traynor only watching at her terminal. "They've gone too far this time. We're not going to sit by and watch, not this time-"

He was about to step into the elevator, brushing off Liara. She stepped in front of him, stopping him in his tracks. "You don't think I want to help them _too?_ I know you can see the big picture, but I can _control myself _when it comes to it. If we screw this up, billions of more will die."

"I've been told that at every turn. I've been forced to leave people behind when _billions are already dying_!" Shepard yelled, pointing outwards to the CIC to no particular object.

The crewmen slowly turned from their station. Specialist Traynor turned around, awkwardly. "Uh, "

Not a single sound. The computers and the constant white-noise of the engine hum seem to completely stop. Traynor's face was shocked, mortified possibly. She stepped back, accidentally bumping into her terminal.

"Oh, good, first argument. That's an important challenge in a relationship." Joker quickly said on the ship comms. "_Infinity _control is scanning our ship for weapons and "biological contaminants". ET: two minutes."

She didn't know what hit the crew so hard. The outburst or what he said. Or, worst, their leader breaking. Billions were dying while they ran around playing diplomat. It was already hard enough for the human crew to leave Earth, seemingly abandoning billions of fates in the hands of the Reapers. Garrus left Palaven behind while under orbital siege. Tali's home world was at least safe. And the rest of the crew out there with Legion and Mordin dead, Miranda Goddess knows where in the black hunting down Cerberus, Jack and Samara barely being pulled out of the fire by Shepard, and so on.

She heard the crew talk about their family. If they're alive or not, if they made it out. She knew. She didn't say anything. And no one came up to her. No one asked. It was better to think they're alive for the moment, for their own sanity.

For the mission.

Everyone felt the war. Everyone had lost someone. And Shepard had to be immortal for their sakes. But not the rest of them. They can break down and expected to be picked up.

Liara glared at Traynor, and with that she and the rest of the crew turned back to their stations. The elevator doors opened. Liara quickly guided him inside, doors closing right behind him. The panel automatically set to the hanger. Two minutes, yet the elevator ride will take ten minutes.

Shepard leaned back against the wall, Mattock in one hand while the other had fingers pinching his nose while the rest of the palm blocked his face. There was only silence between the two. The elevator hum giving at least some comfort.

"Yeah I can I can talk to them." Shepard finally said. "To Captain Lasky, see if they can stop this. But these are men under his command. If they did this on his orders"

"I know I know. If we have to leave them behind, can you do it?" She placed a hand on his shoulder.

"And you still want to go through with some sort of alliance agreement?"

"We have to do what we must to win this war" Even when she as she said it, disgust came over her. She sounded too much like Cerberus

He stood silent. As if he wanted to say something, but decide against. He only laughed, a strange, tired laugh. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I don't think these are the perfect people you were hoping for."

Only a sigh. "Well, you were the one who said "individualistic cultures will have problems." "

He shrugged. "History wasn't my strong suit."

She smiled. Then actually thought what the Commander was doing. No he couldn't get away with it that easy. Try to hide it and keep moving forward. "Shepard, we need you. I'm so sorry, but we need you."

"I'll be fine." He quickly said. Even as he said it, she just saw tired eyes and dark circles.

She was about to say something. Yet for once in a life time, the elevator took less than five hours. The doors opened up to find Mark's men packing up and readying to move out. Injured being stabilized for transport. Garrus, Ashley, James, along with the rest of the security crew brought out weapon blocks, unfolding and readying themselves at the door.

"That isn't wise." Mark said. "You better be ready to put those down, or be ready to get your faces blown off by a mini-MAC."

The hanger door was already opening, slowly revealing a bright white light. EDI turned towards the door, bewildered.

"I didn't do thatâ€¦" She said, arms slowly dropping to her sides.

"Yeah, honey, no offense, but we kinda want to get away from you filthy, barbaric savages and back into the arms of glorious civilization." Contradiction reported. He was starting to get on Liara's nerves.

"But how did youâ€¦"

"It ain't me. Probably some electronic connection when the clamps came on the _Normandy_." He said.

EDI looked slightly violated. A disgusted face formed, and she turned away from him to Shepard and Liara.

The crew looked to Shepard, waiting for orders. They still saw their leader. The Commander took a calming breath, slightly shaky, looked to Garrus. Only a nod and Garrus momentarily looked down with a disapproving look. He placed back his weapon, and soon enough the rest of the crew followed.

"You know, the next step is just unconditional surrender." Garrus said. Versus Contradiction, Garrus' smug and overly sarcastic tone was always welcomed with open arms.

"Seeing how the situation is, we might have to." Shepard said, still looking to the door as it revealed more and more of the hanger.

"Waitâ€¦EDI." Liara said, looking to the AI. "You didn't open the doors?"

"â€¦My systems were compromised.

Liara's eyes widened. She was about to yell, get their attention. By the Goddess, they were waiting onâ€¦

The white lights were blinding. Ambient almost. They seemed to blur together, constantly moving. Nothing could be made out. The hanger wasn't there. Hearing became distant, muffled sounds overlapped by a ringing noise. A noise that grew. There were thuds from somewhere. She could feel herself tripping over something, stumbling on the floor on hands and knees, as if she were desperately trying to look for something. Her head began to hurt worse than before, disorienting. She felt something push her to the ground. Her body hit the floor, face shoved into the ground, barely able to breath.

A knee placed on her back, hands grabbed and placed behind her. A metal object surrounding them. She couldn't move, the knees keeping her still as she vainly struggled.

The blinding light began to fade, slowly replaced by an image of the grey metals of the hanger floor. The ringing began to fade, and the muffled sounds were becoming clearer.

"â€¦Get on the floor now!... Get fucking down, now,

motherfucker!"

"First Sergeant, have your squad check behind those crates!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"I said drop your fucking weapon, now! Drop it or I'll fucking drop you!"

She looked up to find a soldier with a shotgun aiming down the barrel at Garrus, holding out a Vindicator rifle. Combat stance ready. One of the soldiers came up behind him, tackled to the floor with the rifle skidding across the deck. His hands were forcefully placed behind his back. Both the soldiers awkwardly maneuvering around his strange physical appearance and shoving him to the floor.

Great. If the Citadel First Contact Procedure was aggressive, then their First Contact Protocol was a declaration of war.

"I got him. He's secured!"

"Bosh'et! You're going to crack the damn glass." Tali yelled out, downed next to Liara. Her mask was the only thing separating her face between cold metal.

"Shut it or I'll gouge out your eyeballs and skull fuck you!" A soldier yelled out.

"What does that even mean!" She yelled back.

The only response she got was a boot in her back that shoved her body deeper into the metal. A sudden grunt from her, and afterwards only silence.

One of the soldiers walked towards what looked like a commanding officer with a major ranking. "Sir, hanger is clear! Xenos are secured!"

"Good work, First Sergeant. Muhammed, Cutler, move your squads through the elevator and secure the rest of the ship!"

Confirmation from both squad leaders as soldiers moved past the restrained crew. Liara felt something pull on her cuffs, forcing her body off the ground. She felt her skin cut under the constraints, blood completely halted to her hands. Someone grabbed her legs, and soon enough she was hauled off the _Normandy_.

"UN personnel secured. All UNSC objects secured." A soldier announced.

"Get them off the ship! Use deadly force only if fired upon!" The Major ordered.

She passed by Shepard, treated less harshly than the rest of the crew. He was left standing with a rifle aimed directly at his back, guided down the _Normandy_ ramp towards the rest of the humans. The human security crew was forced on their knees, weapons gone, organized row. Ashley and James right at the front of it. One of the soldiers forced her head back down.

"What the hell are you doing!? We're friendlies!" Ashley exclaimed.

"Sorry, ma'am. This is First Contact. We cannot allow you to be a possible threat with sensitive systems aboard." The Major said.

If Liara really wanted too, she could've used a singularity and sent a decent portion of these soldiers flying. Use stasis on whoever was so roughly handling her, knock him down, andâ€¦ Well, do something from there. Tali could easily access her Omni-tool, send out Chikita to cause some sort of havoc. EDIâ€¦ might not be able to do anything. Her control of the ship has been sliced through. How long it took them was unknown. Most likely the entire time they were aboard. Even with completely different systems, they were able to break through. Past one of the most advance cybernetic suites in the galaxy without being detected.

Why couldn't they at least tell them about whatever protocol it was this time, and they could follow it? Then again, Captain Florence wasn't exactly sure what they'd do.

Only to a point would they follow through with this. Then, they'd have to go to the last resort. They would have to quickly get the nukes off their ship. But it was possible. They weren't crazy enough to set off a bomb within their own ship.

"Shepard! Goddess, Shepard!" One of the Asari prisoners yelled out. She was dressed in a Illium Security uniform. Liara recognized her. A thorn in her side when she was tracking down the Shadow Broker. Detective Anaya. An honest cop. The only reason she didn't die a long time ago was because Liara's conscious wouldn't let her. "They aren't telling us anything. They took the human crew-"

A guard used the butt of a rifle and smacked her in the face. She fell forward, a small trail of purple liquid from a large gash in her face.

Liara was immediately forced back onto the ground. Face hitting the metal floor. Blood running through her nose, spilled onto the floor. Pooling and entering her mouth.

The soldier searched her down. Hands moving across her body. Her Carnifex and Lotus submachine gun removed. It wasn't until she felt them reach moreâ€¦ private areas where she jerked her foot. Someone's face met the end of her boot.

"It has a damn kick. Mudda fuckerâ€¦" A soldier said, voice muffled by hands as he grabbed onto a bloodied face.

It.

Someone else kned down on her shoulders, barely able to breath. She felt the cold metal of the barrel of a gun press against her central nervous scalp. The ring of a deactivated safety.

Shepard struggled in the cuffs with the guard only pushing him forward. "What the hell are you doing to my crew?"

"We aren't going to hurt them, Commander. We have to make sure they

aren't a threat."

"You just did! And the civilians!? You're treating them like damn animals." The Commander stopped in his tracks, the guard nearly bumping into him. She looked confused, unknown what she should do. "Let them go!"

She just quickly looked for anyone else to help, panicked.

There was another voice within the hanger. "Sir, these elevators ain't budging.

"Get explosives on the door, breach and clear."

It looks like EDI still maintained some of her control over the ship.

Before Shepard's guard could do anything, he activated his tech shields. Orange particle lights that surrounded his armor. Unfortunately, the cuffs were electronic. And the overload of particles rendered them useless. He easily shook them off, turned around to find a frightened soldier shakenly firing off a shot. The Commander grabbed her weapon beforehand, pushing her rifle away. He punched her in the face, an unconscious body falling to the floor, grabbed her sliver rifle, aimed it at the Major.

Before they could respond, Tali activated Chikita. The V.I shocked whoever was on top of her. He was rendered unconscious for a moment, falling off onto the floor. Chikita deactivated her cuffs, Tali scrambling off the floor and grabbed the rifle of the unconscious soldier. The same rifle Captain Florence had, black with orange lines across the base. A soldier holding down Garrus didn't see it coming. A smack in the face from Tali's rifle, on the floor immediately, and the V.I came around to take off his cuffs. Garrus grabbed the soldier's rifle, and soon enough the V.I came around to the security crew, nearer to them than Liara. They were guarded by only two marines

In the span of about three seconds, the Commander had inspired his crew to get back up. The security crew was struggling now. Before the V.I even reached them, James used his shoulders, knocking down one of the marines right on top of him. Ashley maneuvered her body, cuffs going under her legs and appearing in front of her. The other marine aimed his rifle at James, giving distraction as Ashley placed her cuffs around him. Choking the marine, forcing him to the ground.

James was on top of the other marine. A two-hundred twenty-five pound Alliance marine versus about a one-hundred sixty pound UNSC marine. It wasn't exactly a struggle, even with handcuffs.

"I knew wrestling in high school would pay off." James said.

The soldiers on Liara got off, more worried about the uprising. She was finally able to get a decent view of the area. The hanger door of the Normandy opened into a small area that housed the prisoners. The wall on their right side, and on the left were the prisoners. And a few meters behind them was a lifted area. Metal walls, and on top were more of those ugly, tan transports. In front of them laid a large ramp that lead up perpendicularly to, what seemed like a train

tunnel. The outstretching nose of the _Normandy_ roofing and shadowing it all. She was near the left wall, right in front of the prisoners while Shepard and the rest of the crew were near the right wall.

Her two guards aimed their rifles at the crew. So far, whatever little diplomatic relationships they had was broken. But, at least it didn't lead to violence. It couldn't come to that

She had to join in to save whatever was left. A passive eezo field formed around the two of them, using her biotitics to push them on the floor. Nonlethal, only to be leave them unconscious. Might hurt them with the eezo biting at their skin. Chikita came around after it freed the security crew. The little guy deactivated her cuffs. She got up and stepped over one of the unconscious marines, didn't have time to look over the entire body. Just grabbed one of their weapons. The silver rifle looking ridiculous in her arms.

Goddess, it was heavy.

The Major and the rest of his crew were within the hanger. They came running out, seeing the mess Shepard and his crew left. The security crew in the middle of scavenging for either UNSC weapons or weapon blocks.

And as Liara lookedâ€|where's Captain Florence and his crew? The critically injured were still aboard, but the rest were goneâ€|

Where was _Leng_?

Goddess, where was _EDI_?

"Ah, Jesus H. Christ." The Major said. About fifteen other marines stood next to him. "Fire at will! Fire at will!"

Before Shepard, or Liara, or any one of their respective crews could say anything, it was someone else's voice who came through. "Stand down, Major, _now!_"

She turned to the ramp to find a train car parked there. No one noticed it move in. And packed in it were five soldiers dressed like Lucy and Tom (wherever they were now). But their armor didn't share the battle scars like the other two. Grey armor with orange markings at various places, standing at around six foot four to foot seven. Dark blue visors of different shapes. Each one held shotguns, all aimed at Shepard and the crew.

But they weren't anything special. It was the soldier leading them. His height was unhuman. About seven foot four, maybe six. Extremely muscular, towering over the rest of them, yet still shorter than the Elites. Thick, black underlays with embedded hexagonal patterns, divided by muscle types. Olive green armor. And if anyone's armor has seen war, it was his. Scratches all over. Older than Lucy or Tom's. A large chest piece with the black underlays connected and intertwining within the gear. Massive shoulder connectors, with raised neck guards. The armor looked bulky, hard to move in. A deep scar that began at the top left of his armor and ran down the left metal chest guard of the plate. Humerus protectors that looked more like shoulder guards. Heavy protectors that encompassed the entire forearm, leading

to metallic backhand gloves. Heavy hip and central guards. Heavy thigh armor. Knee cap protectors, with an encompassing ankle guards, leading to large metal boots that were part of the armor.

Nothing like their combat mold or Tom and Lucy's armor. This thing's armor made him into an unnatural tank. Altered far beyond normal soldier reconditioning. Genetic alteration. If this was all natural, then there was finally evidence of enough genetic variation to declare these humans a different species. No, thisâ€¦human was a specialized soldier. A frontline close-quarter soldier, judging by the size of him. And if he wanted to, he could've just picked up Shepard and toss him out the airlock.

The Major and the rest of the marines slowly stopped what they were doing. They stared not at the Captain, but at the thing holding a silver rifle. A dark orange visor staring through the scope of the rifle. A covering head piece with a bottom facial guard, leading to a single rectangular mask, with the visor taking up the center of it all. Tactical stance, slowly walking down the ramp. Completely calm despite the overwhelming numbers.

The other one standing at the end of the ramp wore a uniform exactly like Captain Florence's (wherever he was also). Except only a grey bullet-proof vest and a raised shoulder guard. Neatly trimmed black hair. A roundish face with almond eyes and brown irises. A five o'clock shadow, and facial features covered in markings that make it hard to tell if he was twenty-five, thirty-two, or forty-seven. Dark circles and uneven skin. Tired and almost sad it seemed. Yet despite this, there was some undeniable kind charm to it all.

But his surprisingly young and enthusiastic tone was denying whatever charm was there by anger. It seemed... forced. "Major, I ordered you to confiscate their weapons, peacefully. Without force! I also ordered you to care for these civilians to the best of your abilities! Not treat them like damn hostages!"

He stormed down the ramp. His guard moving with the green armored soldier following up front. Captain Lasky only had a holstered pistol, hand nowhere near it. Looking only to his men, overlooking the "xenos".

"Master Chief." The Major said, as if he didn't hear the Captain. Soldiers' rifles were still raised despite the Captain's orders. "It's me. Jake Reynolds? You saved my life back on Earth."

"Major!" Lasky said, stepping in front of the soldier.

So that was the Master Chief? The one who according to Captain Florence, 'single handedly saved humanity', whom the Normandy saved. Liara hadn't given him much thought. Only some prodigy like Commander Shepard had become throughout the galaxy. But she never witnessed anyone gawk over him like the major and his men are. In shock almost. Nor did she really expect a genetically altered machine

"He doesn't sign autographs." Lasky said, calmly. He walked up directly to the major, face to face. The gun directly pointed at his chest. "Stand down, immediately."

Whatever daze the Major had gotten himself into was broken when the

Master Chief didn't say anything. He was down the ramp, in the middle of Shepard and the crew, and Liara and the Illium prisoners. His helmet turned towards her for a moment. Only an orange visor that displayed no emotion. He turned back to the situation at hand.

"Sir, I'm following Contact protocol." The Major said in his defense.

"You follow my orders, Major. I understand that this is goes against protocol, but I made my orders clear. Do these civilians look like a threat!?" Lasky said, moving aside to let the Major look upon the bloodied civilians.

The Major stood silent for a moment, angry. "Sir. With all due respect, we don't know what capabilities they have. Because of this, we have to treat them like a threat!"

"Really, Major? You and your men are the only threat here, treating them like they were Covies! And using violent force against these people, whom we guaranteed safe entry!"

"Sir! They attacked my men. I had to use the last resort-"

Captain Lasky quickly turned from him, walking towards one of the unconscious soldiers. The one Shepard knocked out. "Do you see any bullet wounds, Major? No. She's unconscious. They responded with appropriate force. Unlike you."

He placed his hands on his hips. "Who ordered you to breach and board the Normandy?"

"I was following protocol-"

"No. I explained the situation perfectly clear to you. You took it with doubt, but not enough to defy my direct orders."

"And where's Captain Florence? And the Spartan-IIIs, and Lieutenant Banks and his men?"

"Sir-"

He looked at his men. "Major, you were given exactly twenty-five men. But I only see twenty-one. And if the description reports of Lieutenant Leng and his men are accurate, they're missing too. Along withâ€¦ Edi, if I got the name right."

Lasky looked to the Major. Only found a silenced face. Lasky sighed, and suddenly whatever false anger he had was removed to a sullenness. He placed his hand on a comm. "Roland, lock down all hangers. Lock down all transports and fighters. Relieve Major Reynolds of any and all command immediately. Arrest all ONI personnel aboard. See they aren't anywhere near a starship. I want the Infinity searched for Captain Florence and his crew, and for a Lieutenant Leng and his men, and a woman xeno named Edi. First Sergeant, see Major Reynolds to the brig for incompetence of command."

"And you aren't? You have already broken protocol!" Reynolds yelled out. The marine had another pair of cuffs, placed it around the major. "You should be the one in the damn brig!"

Lasky was about to say something, but he stopped himself. Whatever it was, he decided against it. "Major, humans were aboard that ship. Civilians, women, children. Our duty as soldiers of the UNSC is to protect Humanity at any and all _costs_. Humanity is at risk from these squids, these Reapers. I invited the _Normandy _crew to help save the humans out here from the squids. And if I have to break protocol in order to uphold the basic foundations of the UNSC, that all of you swore to follow, then so be it."

"What about the xenos?! What about them?!" The Major struggled in his cuffs.

"They are allies of the humans out here, and because of that they are allies of the UNSC." Lasky said. No anger or rising voice in the entire justification. Just clam with authority. He took a deep breath. "Get him out of here."

The marines took their commander up towards the ramp. He stopped struggling. Passing by Shepard and the crew, and these super soldiers. The other half of the marines stayed with the Captain.

Lasky stood on the _Normandy _ramp for a moment. Rubbed his face with both palms. Another deep breath, and looked to the next situation.

So, internal strife wasn't beneath them. And again, it was from something Captain Florence mentioned in panic. Between this ONI, or Naval Intelligence, and the UNSC. Because this was first contact through the Relay, with Captain Florence yelling at them that "they knew what was on the other side", ONI had something to do with the _Legend After _going through the Relay. Why was unknown. But now, it seems ONI has attacked the _Normandy _and taken repossession of the Captain and his crew, and taken EDI as a prisoner while the rest of the crew was occupied.

_And Leng. _He was gone too.

Why Major Reynolds treated the prisoners like this might've merely been because of degradation. Or what he believed was following 'protocol'. He did side with ONI, maybe that had something to do with it.

Lasky walked up to Shepard, dropping the rifle on the floor. Lasky looked to the prisoners first. "Get them biofoam, now. See if its compatible with their anatomy." Turned to Shepard. "If you have any information on these species, we need it. Roland, the ship AI, will watch over them, make sure they get proper medical treatment.

He then saluted the Commander. "Captain Thomas J. Lasky, United Nations Space Command _Infinity_." He let go of the salute, reached out his hand to Shepard.

The Commander relaxed. His entire body almost dropping. He looked to the Captain, saluted him, then reached out and shook his hand. "Commander Shepard, SSV _Normandy_."

Lasky nodded. "Shepard, I've been wanting to meet you and your crew. I apologizeâ€¦ for all of this. If I would've known what was going on down here, this wouldn't have happened. It's my fault,

Commander."

"I understand, Captain. Just thank God here before the situation could get any worse." Shepard said, actual relief on his face.

"I've received an advance report that you were sent to talk to us. Something about an agreement to help fight these Reapers?"

Shepard nodded. "We were sent by Fleet Admiral Steven Hackett, commanding officer of the Alliance Navy, to rescue any and all survivors and try to establish a peaceful relationship."

He nodded, looked to the crew as they dropped their weapons and took a moment to recover. Liara joined up with Shepard, almost in the same exhausted shape.

Lasky could clearly see it. The overworked crew, the dark circles, and the panicked breathing slowly calming down. He smiled. "Do all of your missions go this "well"?"

9. The Politics and half-truths

****Major revisions have been made to this chapter on April 22nd, 2014. I hope this improves the quality of this chapter...****

****Unknown location aboard Cronos station, 2186 Military Calendar, 10:16****

"What exactly happened?"

"The patients tried to escape. We had to put them down or they were going to destroy the whole station." Kai said as the Illusive man lite up another cigarette. He stared into the brightness of the sun.

"Good job."

"What?"

"This will be a first time when I commend somebody for destroying a asset, but this is different. If they would've gotten off that station it would have complicatedâ€¦plans."

"What is our next step?"

The Illusive Man turned to him.

"Don't think this has slowed us down, Leng. But it does throw in a bit ofâ€¦push backs." The Illusive man thought for a moment. "The status report on Illium?"

"The Reaper forces are being overwhelmed by the Xeno fleets. Reports are confirmed that they brought in a ship approximately twenty-eight kilometers in length."

"Impressive." He said with no surprise in his voice. He looked from monitor to monitor. The twenty-eight kilometer ship was much different than the earlier ones. It was purple with a sleek design and heavily energized on plasma. If he were to compare the designs to

another species, he would probably say it was closer to Asari ship design.

Kai also looked with Illusive Man. "The unknown forces are not engaging Alliance ships or Illium security forces. Hundreds of these alien ships are encircling the planet. Apparently, Shepard had managed to get aboard peacefully on the ship UNSC _Infinity_."

"Soâ€|they started some sort of an alliance, haven't they?" The Illusive man took another drag of his cigarette and puffed out a small amount of smoke.

"It would seem so." Leng still stood there with his hands behind his back. As always he didn't show much emotion on his face. The only way to tell really would be through his voice, and right now his voice was plain with a hint of dissatisfaction.

"How many field operatives have we 'recruited' at sanctuary?"

"Approximately eleven thousand so far."

He stared at his monitors; he took another inhale of his cigarette and spoke. "Reroute them to Cronos and have companies Alpha through Golfer stationed aboard kilometer five."

"Yes sir, what are you planning?"

"An attack." He looked back to the monitors. If this was considered a first contact -which it probably will be- then there's only one way this will go down.

****Citadel Embassies, 2186 Citadel Calendar, 10:19****

Tavos sat at her desk with the oppression of a major headache that made it hard to think. In decision on whether this was the end or the Goddess was helping them.

In the past few hours, reports came from the SSV Normandy that three ships of unknown design and origin came through the relays. All were destroyed, and one disappeared. Then later a entire armada busted through, with ships ranging from five miles to twenty-eight kilometers and so on.

All of the ships attacked every Reaper on sight, and are now pushing them completely off the planet Illium. They achieved that within a mere two hours, which would have been impossible for any other Citadel species.

Admiral Hackett had already sent Shepard ahead to try and negotiate a truth with these Xenos. As much as the council and even Tavos hate to admit, Shepard was a good choice. But then that one report came through that scared everyone.

_Humans have been spotted aboard all unknown ships and are among the crew. It is reported that they act suspicious toward all Citadel species except other humans. It has also been reported that they try to arrest and take any and all Citadel species to the ship: UNSC _Infinity_.

And what was the first thing everybody did when they found out that the first contact were mostly humans? Oh no, they didn't try to figure it out, that would've been too easy. They scrambled for scrape goat and arrested everyone within the Systems Alliance embassy including Councilor Udina for violation of the Citadel conventions, and Citadel Naval treaty. And also for keeping secrets from the rest of the Citadel species such as the ability to create massive ships without eezo, and having hundreds of those ships that may save all life in the galaxy.

Udiana denied the knowing of the 'UNSC', and to Tevos's years of experience, he was telling the truth. But even so, there were humans aboard those ships and he didn't know a thing?

As Valern theorized on how there are more humans and how they weren't from Earth. And Sparatus moaning on how can Humans be better than the Turians? Tevos had been figuring out ways to form a alliance. She put together a small theory—more of a guess really: The Protheans may have something to do with this. Then again, the other human's technology has no trace of element zero and they only found the relays now? The only possible way to find a relay is through Prothean ruins.

Unfortunately, her mind had to be reanimated to the more important issue at hand: If these humans act suspicious toward Xenos, then it wouldn't be a wise idea to do the whole routine of, 'introduce them to the Citadel. Then force them to obey Council rule' (It may not sound that way, but in the end, galactic politics worked exactly like that). Tevos assumed they wouldn't even listen to the council.

The only leverage they had was Udiana and the Systems Alliance. Tevos wondered though, is this a dominant race or a one that can work with others? Judging from the specs of the enormous twenty-eight kilometer cruiser, it was defiantly not made by the same race. It was just—too different. Maybe this was a little evidence that they can work with others. Either way, the Council might outvote Tevos on to arrest Udiana on war crimes such as the UNSC using multiple nuclear bombs on or above the planet. Even if Udina and the Systems Alliance really did have nothing to do with this.

Now, the Citadel can tolerate a little nuclear warfare, though it was rarely seen. Not until the report of a nuclear bomb of one-hundred-fifty megatons going off on the Illium surface. While in reality, this bomb of low magnitude might not even affect the planet. The only evidence of that though was from the use of Atomic Bombs on Earth. Yet that was different, and Illium was a much different planet. Then out of nowhere when more and more ships came through; it seems that the use of nuclear bombs have increased sharply with a average of three-hundred megatons.

And another thing: What did they go through to build something as 'small' as the Infinity? It could be a matter of these ships being easy to build for them, or they're a violent race devoted to—war.

If that's the case then Tevos would have to try a completely new approach. Maybe she should treat them like they were making an alliance with the Krogan.

Let's just hope they see more reason than the Krogan.

Her headache just got worst.

****Aboard UNSC Infinity, 2557 Military Calendar, 10:20****

Florence sat in the chair in the stereotypical, tan interrogation room. One way mirror, two chairs on the opposite end of a table in the middle of the room with a lamp light. A black ancient open and close door (Exactly like the ones you see in the ancient history vids or a UNSC outer colony) was the only thing that kept the room separate from the rest of the ship.

The moment Florence was brought aboard the *_Infinity*; *_Captain* Lasky moved in without word and removed the tag signifying Mark's rank and allegiance to the UNSC. He was placed in cuffs and forced through the halls of the ship to this room. Here, they removed his cuffs and gave him a orange jumpsuit, telling him to change quickly.

When he did, a Spartan-IV for God's sake took his gear and closed the door. Florence has been sitting in this room ever since, twiddling his thumbs.

The door unlocked and entered two people dressed inâ€¦ ONI officer suits and wool fedoras, matching nicely in a odd way. Both had brown hair styled in the way of the people of the 20th century. One had a slightly curved nose, and looked serious with no humor and a sense of ambition. The other had darker skin and squinty eyes. He also looked serious, but he gave more of a sense of a man of charisma and humor.

The ambitious one took a seat while the other stood right next to him. The other put both his hands on the table and looked to Florence, his humor receding into hostility.

"Mark Florence? I'm Detective Cole Phelps and this is my partner: Stefan Bekowsky, Office of Naval Intelligence." Phelps pointed Bekowsky as he stared at Mark.

Florence also noticed how he didn't say *Captain* Florence or not even detainee Florence.

"Why are you doing this?" Florence asked. "Isn't it usually just a Court-marshal than execution?"

Cole smiled at his words, pointing his pencil at Florence while he leaned in his chair. "Not in your case." The smile disappeared from his face and was replaced with seriousness and a sense of hostility. "HIGHCOM is deciding whether or not to commend you, or shoot you and throw you out the airlock. Mostly because of this fact: Human lives have been found aboard Xeno ships, and we were able to save them because of your discovery. They also want to know what exactly happened, because you have a history Mark. A history of defying orders withâ€¦ good reason. For example, you did this was during the Great War during the battle of Earth. Your superiors ordered you to engage a CSO-Battle cruiser, but you instead helped saved the lives aboard the San Francisco Station. The only reason you weren't executed a long time ago because your actions were justified. And the only reason you aren't a admiral is because everyone in HIGHCOM wants your head."

"But thisâ€¦" Cole continued. He began to yell in frustration "â€¦was utterly one of the stupidest a UN captain can make. ONI and HIGHCOM wants to know what the hell you were thinking."

"Ok." Florence said plainly. He put his hands on the table then looked to Stefan. "You're quiet."

"I'm going to ask you questions first about your career and accessible information. Is that understood?" Cole asked a little annoyed. Stefan responded by standing back up from the table, and placed his right hand on his holstered M6 pistol.

"Why exactly?" Florence responded, looking to Detective Phelps. "You already know my records."

"Becauseâ€¦" Stefan answered. "Our superiors want to get the complete truth, while we're good at our jobs they don't want anything to slip. We're doing this to see how you react when we get to the real questions."

Mark stood quiet and accepted the strange test. He remembered his days with the millions of other servants of Humanity. The superiors he was under, and the men he commanded. Those were the days when Humanity scrambled for anything they found. Those were the days when 'reinforcements' was only a couple platoons or a few ships. Mark questioned why they didn't use a lie detector test. Maybe they'll get to that afterwards.

"Sureâ€¦"

"Let's begin." Cole interrupted. "You were born in Monopoli, the Bari region of Italy in the European Union. At age eighteen in 2548, you enrolled instead of drafted like most, into the UNSC Navy to fight the Covenant. Is that correct?"

"Why not?" Florence said looking from Stefan.

"Answer the question straight, asshole!" Stefan yelled with complete threat. He leaned back onto the table looking at Florence.

Florence sighed. They just wanted to keep Humanity safe like he did. Even if they were Naval Intelligence, Humanity was first. And right now, they saw Florence as a threat to Humanity. This was the worst accusation that couldn't be less accurate.

"Yes." He quietly said with hints of anger.

"In 2550." Cole continued. "You graduated from the Naval Academy of Navigation and Naval basic training. You were assigned to the UNSC Pillar of Autumn, and took part in the operations to capture the Covenant's leadership whichâ€¦failed. You also took part in the fall of Reach, and nobility served under Captain Jacob Keyes, and alongside the Master Chief and A.I Cortana. Is this correct?"

Florence nodded. He remembered his days with the Pillar of Autumn under Captain Keyes. He never paid any attention to Humanity's future savior and his little A.I.

"The ship docked at Aszod docking bay on Reach. From there you volunteered to lead a rescue of an ODSST squad lead by Sergeant Edward Buck on Reach. When you reached the ODSSTs, the _Pillar of Autumn_ was forced to take off without you. Is that correct?"

"Sir yes, sir."

"The UNSC frigate, _Up and Over_, played a transmission calling for code Omega-Three, and they were holding last-ditch evacuations. You and the ODSST team headed to the location of the ship. It was heavily damaged and their captain was dead. Since you were a secondary XO to the Autumn, you take over and desperately take off as the Covenant glassed that planet"

The _Up and Over_ in its final moments on Reach was overcrowded with remaining soldiers and civilians on the equatorial continents of Reach. The Covenant was gaining closer and closer. Enemy ground troops were only being held back by any able-bodied man fighting desperately for safety. The crew was understaffed, and the captain was shot during an emergency fuel resupply that left them exposed to enemy infiltration.

"In high orbit, you were attacked by the Covenant armada. And you ordered your crew to take evasive maneuvers, and hide out in the space wreckage. Instead of retreating for Earth, you instead lead the _Up and Over_ to Anchor 9. From there, you evacuate survivors then slipspace jumped, _near Reach_ and ended up back at Earth."

"You say that my emergency evac of Anchor 9 was a bad thing! Those people were UNSC. If I didn't save, then there could've been a possible breach in Cole Protocol-"

"Shut the hell up or I'll break your fucking skull." Stefan said. He smashed Florence's hand which hurt more than it should have.

Cole continued, acting without remorse. "You were appointed a Captain along with two dozen other candidates for your bravery and the desperateness of the UNSC at the time. Thenâ€¦" Cole eyed his notes, making a bored smile. "Nothing else really notably. Besides you disobeying orders and saving lives. You served under Lord Hood in the defense of Africa. Then the invasion of the Flood happened. Then the war ended. Is that correct?"

"Sir yes, sir."

Cole turned a page in his notebook, looking it over. "You were reassigned to guard Humanity's borders aboard the UNSC _Devil's Honor_. Then in 2556 the Walker incident happened, and agent Walker died and you lost your ship in battle. You were under investigation of murdering agent Walker, is that correct?"

"You forgot the part where Walker purposely sabotaged my ship!" Florence said with hostility. He knew saying this was stupid but he couldn't help it. It was anger who made him say it.

"There was no evidence for that!" Cole yelled back. He was leaning on the table now. "Walker saved your life and what happened? You killed him! The only thing ONI didn't have against you was hard evidence."

"I didn't do it." Florence was leaning on the table also, speaking in a half whisper. "And whatever happened, he got what he deserved. I hope the guy took that hammer to his fucking brains."

"We never found a hammer at the crime scene. Are you saying that there was a hammer involved?" Cole questioned as he leaned back into his chair, writing down more notes.

Why the fuck did I say that?

"Thought the case was closed?" Florence quickly responded, also leaning back and crossing his arms. "And I'm told that the injury was caused by a blunt object such as a hammer or mallet. I'm sorry, but aren't we concentrating on something else?"

Cole rubbed his face with one hand then look back to his notes. "On February 18th, you were assigned to guard the research team investigating the newly discovered Forerunner artifact, 'God's Key'. And on February nineteenth at 08:36, you ordered your ships to move into God's Key despite Lord Hood's specific orders. Is that correct?"

Florence stood silent for a moment. He was shaking a little.

"We have all survivors' reports on your ships about what happened." Cole continued. "So don't fucking say that 'I didn't do it', do you understand? We are trying to figure out why you did it. This had no explanation what so everâ€¦"

Florence sat forward. His face was slightly sweating and his hands partially shaking. "I need to tell you something." He whispered.

Cole also leaned forward. "What the hell happened Florence?" He whispered in a calming voice. Stefan looked from Florence's to Cole's face sort of looking like a idiot.

"I did order those ships butâ€¦.This will sound crazy, but something causedâ€¦me to do it. I don't know whatâ€¦but fucking _something_! It was like insanity. It forced me toâ€¦I don't know exactly what it was, but you have to believe me!" Florence pointed to a wall. "That thing caused me to move those ships against my will."

Cole leaned back and looked to Stefan. Surprise and confusion rained on both their faces. Stefan readjusted his hat and leaned on the wall behind Florence. Cole quickly wrote something done in his book.

"He looks like he's telling the truth." Stefan shrugged, looking at Florence. "Even though it seems absolutely stupid."

"The UNSC does test for sanity right?" Cole asked. And it was more of a serious question.

"They do every year." Stefan answered. "So, you're basically saying this isn't your fault?"

"Yes! And there is a threat to Humanity's security, somethingâ€¦" Florence pointed to his head. "â€¦is inside my head!" He laughed a little insanely. "Whatever it is, it could retain my memories, access my CNI chip, and reveal the location of Earth! I'm asking you to help

me get this thing out of my head to help the UNSC!"

"Florence." Cole's face was now angry. Not at Mark, but at the possible threat to Humanity's safety. Under his anger was a small sense of fear. "If you are calming a threat to Humanity and a violation of the Cole Protocol then this is one of the weirdest I've ever seen." He said half yelling. "I also don't think you're pleading for your life to be spared. Then you would've just said that the voice did it instead of you without the threat of all this. Or maybe you are smart enough to use the safety of Earth and Humanity as a excuse to prolong your life. And if you did that, then I'll shoot you right now."

The leveled conversation was interrupted by a small squeak of the door. All three men turned their heads to the pinnacle only to find the head of state and Government.

Lord Hood stood there with his cap on, looking around the room in suspicion. His face, as usual from the few times Florence has seen him, was blank and focused. It was a face well known for the dedication of the UNSC that was more important than his care for his own well-being and social/emotionally state. Hell, there was even a little roamer in the marines that Lord Hood was biologically engineered to have no emotions.

All three of them stood and saluted the Admiral as he walked in with a Spartan-VI. Even Florence did in his orange jump suit. Even if he was no longer part of the UNSC and considered a traitor.

"Admiral on the deck!" Cole yelled.

"Detective Phelps, Bekowsky, you may leave, you did your job Good work, gentlemen." He nodded to both of them,

"What?" Cole asked in surprise and angry As if this happened to him once before.

"You heard me." Hood said with a little annoyance.

"Excuse me sir?" Cole, standing with a small stuttering.

"We're we're in the middle of an interrogation and there could be a possible threat to Humanity"

"I know Detective. I've been listing to the whole conversation. I'll handle it from here."

"But sir-!"

"Detective! That is a order!" Lord Hood threatened as him and Cole had a brief stare down.

Cole looked to Florence, then back to Hood. Stefan grabbed Cole and led him out of the room. Florence could see that Cole was resisting slightly. The detective turned around and started to say something to Lord Hood, but then decided against is.

When the door shut behind them, Lord Hood turned to Florence with the same stern look in his face. The Spartan-IV walked up to the security camera at the corner of the room and attached something to it. He then walked to the one-way mirror and did a turning motion with his

hands. The Spartan moved quietly, standing guard at the door with a MA5D.

"At ease." Hood said as he took a seat in the chair Cole was once occupying. Florence followed.

"You'll have to forgive Detective Cole and Stefan. They were the top policemen in Los Angeles back on Earth until ONI recruited them. They dealt with these sort of political situations all the time.

Lord Hood's face somehow turned more to the sullen void. He placed both hands at his side. "Captain, what I'm about to tell you is completely confidential and will not leave this room under UNSC Law JAG 4456/LHG."

Ok, this was a weird change of pace.

"Uh excuse me, sir?" Florence said, making sure the confusing on his face was noticeable.

"Do you know why you were picked for this mission, captain?"

Florence answered despite his confusing. "From what I know sir, it's because I'm the 'best candidate' But you and I both know I'm not. Hell, even I wouldn't have picked me."

"Captain what have they told you about your ship?"

"Standard UNSC Marathon-class cruiser, armed for full conventional warfare. Fresh off the line. Why?" Florence sat up a little, wondering where this was leading to. What the hell did his ship have to do with anything?

"Captain." Hood signed then continued. "In 2553, the UNSC made a discovery on the dead ring of Installation 04. Our scouts were making their daily routes when they picked up something. When we investigated we found this" He offered a data pad to Florence.

When he looked at it, it was a small structure; it defiantly had the Forerunner architecture but it also had that design from that unknown race. The same design as the God Key.

"When we studied it." Lord Hood continued. "It looked like part of the schematics to a Forerunner engine design. Like the UNSC _Infinity_, Forerunner technology has provided the back bone to the UNSC military forces. Of course, ONI wanted to get their filthy hands on it. They were trying to create a more common engine unlike the massive expenses and manufacturer time on the _Infinity_."

"Sir, are you saying".

"When we completed the engines in 2557, they were highly experimental. The navy finished the _Legend After_, and when the Elites discovered God's Key, ONI wanted to send the _Legend After_ to see what would happen. To see if these designs would have any correlation between the engine and God's Key."

Florence spoke in a more quiet tone, trying to hold his fears and

shock. "Why me? If this was a experimental engine, then why put me in charge of it? ONI and HIGHCOM wanted me dead for a long time, and you wouldn't trust me with it!"

"I choose you because you were expandable. If you died then HIGHCOM would only lose a prick in their side. You would've died a hero to the civilians back on the colonies."

Florence sat there for a moment taking it in. In reality, he really didn't care if they choose to risk his life. But ONI did have full knowledge of the situation and risked three ship's worth of crew? Including three !? This is a direct violation of Cole Protocolâ€|

"Captain Florence." Hood said. "There were two things that troubled our scientists for a long time. One was when we worked on itâ€|something happened. Workers, scientists, soldiersâ€|.Spartans, wentâ€|rouge, insane. They weren't following orders, hacking into systems, saying they had voices inside their headsâ€|."

"Jesus Christâ€|.."

"ONI was forced to terminate the project. And all they got out of it was the engine. Of course instead of destroying; ONI like usual, used it. When the shipyards finished the _Legend After_, ONI had their scientists replace the engine systems with the Forerunner prototype. I didn't know about the effects the engine had on our personnel. Not until ONI told me themselves."

"Captain." Lord Hood took a breath and continued. "That engine wasâ€|.intelligent. It knew who to target. The watch commander, the head security guard, you. This thing wanted something but it couldn't get it. The fact is, and I may have not made myself very clear, is that ONI knew that the engine will take control. They just wanted to see if anything else would happen if it got in contact with God's Key."

"Areâ€|.are you saying that my ship's engines are inside my head?" Mark's sweat increased, and to calm himself he tapped a rhythmic beat.

"I don't think they were engines." Lord Hood pulled out a small holo-display and clicked it.

Contradiction appearedâ€|thank God.

"Captain, I like your new uniform." He commented, nodding to Florence and smiling.

"Contradiction." Lord Hood said, annoyed.

"The hell crawled up your ass?" Contradiction whispered. He continued with a normal tone. "Anyways Captain. This first started when I detected anomalies in the engines. It was transmitting a signal and when I traced it, it led right to you. The signal suddenly tight-beamed, thenâ€|you gave the orders to go into God's Key and fuck up everything.

"At firstâ€|I didn't realize that the signal was controlling you, I assumed that it was a scrambled communications from the engine rooms.

When you...ah, pissed me off into silence, I analyzed the communications and I realized that this beam was highly strong, more powerful than our transmission. When the ship teleported through God's Key, the beam was trying to communicate with your CNI chip. This is when I intervened and cut off communications before it can cause more damage. I could barely keep it back."

"Contradiction, why didn't you tell me?" Florence asked in a raspy voice.

"The matter was captain, you already had a shitload caused by you or the engine thing.., and I didn't deem it necessary to tell you. When you nuked the _Legend After_, the beam, as obvious, stopped completely. I analyzed to see your CNI chip, and to be honest, I'm still not sure if that 'voice' is still inside you. Mostly because when workers were moved from building the _Legend_ _After_, they still reported voices. Theyâ€|were still there."

Florence reached back and gently pushed his hair and touched his CNI chip at the back of his head. If he removed it, he would die.

"Then how come I'm not hearing any voices?" Florence asked.

"It's possible that either you don't hear the voices, but they're still there waiting to strike, or it's because of your CNI chip. As you know, the CNI chip keeps all the classified slip space routes, and the positions and rotations of the UNSC planets. And when you die the chip completely erases it from your mind. The CNI chip has proven to be more useful. When Captain Jacob Keyes was infected by the Flood parasite, the CNI chip prevented the location of Earth from falling into the enemies hands, and it's argued that he outlasted the Flood infection with the help of that chip. This could be used toâ€|.act as a security guard for your mind. Unlike the workers and other security personnel working on the engines, theyâ€|.didn't have a CNI chip."

Florence sat there for a moment. "So the voice can still be inside my head?"

"Unfortunately." Contradiction said, this time without sarcasm.

"You aren't going to ask what's going to happen to you?" Lord Hood said.

"What? My military career or my sanity?"

"Military career."

"What is going to happen, admiral?" Florence said. His was voice still and emotionless.

"The only thing saving you and open to the public is humans were discovered on the other side of God's Key." Hood ignored Contradiction as he began pacing around the holo-display. "These 'squids' or what the locals like to call 'Reapers', have attacked, killed and harmed Human civilians and soldiers. Really, it's a thing to be argued, but it may get you a boost up."

"Commander." Lord Hood gravely continued like a warning, Florence noticed he didn't say Captain. "Fortunately the only people who know

what exactly happened are Roland, Captain Lasky, me, the detectives, your ship's crews, and a few others. The only way possible to make it seem like this wouldn't be your fault is to throw in that you received orders to go through the relay."

"Put that on someone else? And wouldn't someone who has the slightest intelligence realize that it's strange that this was only reported recently? I also think that none of my crew would back me and I wouldn't blame them."

"Captain, the only survivors of your ship was you and the people with you."

Florence didn't process that correctly. "What? Cole said earlier he got reports from all the other survivors"

"He was telling the truth." Hood replied plainly.

Florence was in shock. This was his fault, all his fault. No it was the voice in his head that made him do this. "Sir, I deserve nothing less than execution."

"Hold on their mister suicidal." Contradiction interrupted. "The first thing you got to realize is that you may have saved more Human lives. From my judgment with everything we experienced, these people were losing badly, and apparently from doing a little hacking their Earth was completely token over."

Florence and Lord Hood both looked up to the little A.I. Mark's heart skipped a beat. How did they let their own home fall? What pathetic excuse could they provide so that the Reapers claimed their planet? Even at the blackest moments of the UNSC, they never let the Covenant or the Flood take control of the planet. Even if Earth didn't have much of a strategic value to the rest of the campaign, That Was Home!

"They let Earth fall into enemy hands?" Lord Hood said in a half-yell.

"It was that bad Admiral. Reaper forces were completely hidden until they reached the moon."

Lord Hood nodded then looked to Florence. "Captain, I'll take care of the politics. You don't have to worry about the detectives. Your executive officer, Jessica Reed, will serve aboard with Captain Lasky as a assistant navigator and XO. And that exercise of you entering the city will be excused since you were trying to save that marine"

"Did he make it?"

"He did. The dark energy wounds were nothing compared to the plasma wounds during the Great War. Banks and his men will be reassigned to the Marine and ODST ground forces. The two Spartans will be merged with the Spartan-IVs to secure the planet."

"And my A.I.?" Florence asked.

"Huh, you're A.I is a special story."

****Aboard UNSC Infinity, unknown location, 2186 Citadel Calendar, 1025

All three of them waited in that room for around four minutes.

Unfortunately, Tali didn't have time to observe the marvelous structure of the UNSC Infinity. Keelah, she didn't even have time to look at the hangar rooms. The soldiers just guided (or more like forced) them to small area surrounded by simple, black walls. The only thing Tali got in this field trip was that their ground combat technology seemsâ€¦ primitive.

Rifles and weapons that still fired lead bullets. Tanks and cars outfitted with dozens of rounds of tungsten ammunition. The armor of the soldiers also matched the same era manner. The only thing that looked advance was the HUD of their helmet. There was no shielding, no body combat molding, and no weapon folds.

And as they walked, every soldier was staring at Laira and Tali suspiciously. The hangar they landed on was filled with hundreds of soldiers, each wearing either white or green combat armor. Most of the ones within the white armor seemed a lot younger than the ones in green; maybe the green was a sign of being a veteran. Ship workers wearing yellow and blue also crowded the hangar each doing their own task, prepping transports, loading cargo, getting wounded off ships. But out of all that there was something sticking out of the crowd.

He (or sheâ€¦you never know) was a lot taller than the rest in green armor and a orange visor. Tali didn't get a good look at him but he seemedâ€¦ important. Soldiers relayed orders to him and a officer, was Lasky his name? Was talking to him with a holo-projector about something. The man in green armor was clenching his fists.

When they got to the room, two soldiers unlike the rest guarded the door. They had armor that seemed highly advanced in gray colors with orange strips and blue visors. And for some reason they seemed a lot taller than the rest of the soldiers. They closed the door, and Tali thought they were still outside, keeping watch.

Tali scanned the room. As obvious, there were cameras, heavy set locked doors, and a holo-projector in the middle of a gray desk connected to the rest of the ship.

Shepard and Liara also stayed quiet, either because they had nothing to say or just trying to keep quiet because of the cameras.

"Didn't they say they were going to let us contact the Normandy?" Shepard said, finally breaking the silence.

"They could've liedâ€¦" Tali responded in a pessimistic way.

"Florence saidâ€¦"

"Florence can lie too."

"Wellâ€¦you're in a down mood." Shepard replied, looking at Tali.

Tali signed. "I'm just being realistic."

"And that means not trusting people?"

"I don't know Shepardâ€¦." Tali waved her Omi-tool. That should disrupt the sound sensors for a few minutes. "These people are strange. Having better ship technology than any other Citadel raceâ€¦ And then having ground combat technology of a barbaric era. Then again, I guess it's also the way the act towardsâ€¦ 'Xenos'."

"Is it becauseâ€¦ you know?" Shepard asked, trying not to hurt her.

"Probably, ha, even the other Citadel species don't treat the Qurains this bad. The UNSC acts like me and Liara are going to blow up the ship."

When she said this, the door opened and the same person Shepard was talking to on the transport came into the room. He was dressed in a grey uniform with his ranking pinned to his shoulder while another held shoulder plating. His black hair showed small signs of greying and behind those happy, brown eyes held tiredness beyond comprehension. A shoulder pad connected to a vertebrae protection column laid above the grey uniform. His nametag said: Captain Thomas J. Lasky.

He sat in the chair at the other end of the table without word. He sighed and smiled at the three.

Even with his tired eyes and greying hair, he looked to be in his late-thirties. His face held a simple kindness unlike the seriousness and fear of Captain Florence, or the suspicion and discrimination against her and Liara.

"Having a good day, I hope?" Lasky asked, smiling. "We haven't properly meet, Captain Thomas Lasky, UNSC Infinity." He held his hand out to Liara first.

She shook it without hesitation. "Dr. Liara T'Soni. I'll be honest Captain, you seem more hospitable then the rest of your crew."

"Ha, sorry about that. As you may or may not know, we don't really trust external life forms."

He turned to Tali. "Sorry, I didn't get your name."

"Tali' Zorah Nar Rayya Vas Normandy."

"Rightâ€¦ I'll call you Tali if that's alright." He turned to Shepard. "Commander Shepard? Sorry we have to treat your shipmates like this. Unfortunately, everyone on this ship who's over five had some very bad experience with Xenos."

In the exact manners of the Terra Nova party; the UNSC has a major distrust to the point of hatred against Xenos. Florence said that during their war, Humanity was almost wiped out. Not even the Humans and Turians could really do that to each other. What kind of menace could they have faced? If they required ships this huge to fight it,

then these enemies must be a lot worse than the Reapers. But in reality, does this imply to act hostile toward everyone they meet? Ignorance really is the greatest enemy in the galaxyâ€|.

"Shepard, I did promise you that I'll let you contact your superiors. If you need a horn just ask."

"Thank you Captain, but I think we got it." Shepard said. He pulled out his Omi-tool and started to tap in the Normandy's line. Captain Lasky eyed the thing with interest.

"Interesting little communicator. I don't suppose that's the same thing Tali used to hack the cameras?" Lasky asked eyeing from Shepard to Tali.

Tali looked at him, surprised. And when she did, he smiled. "Our systems picked it up pretty quick. Trust me, your systems are good, but it makes so much noise that even a deaf person can hear it."

Their counter systems are more advanced than Tali assumed. She could've improved her Omni-tool so the sensors wouldn't pick it up. She was just so used to pressing the button and having it work.

"I suggest you don't try this crap with anybody else. Doing so willâ€|."

"Yeah, yeah we know, get us executed." Tali said, mockingly.

"Glad you figured out the system. Now, justâ€|don't do it again."

"Alright, I have a connection with the Normandy." Shepard interrupted.

"Normandy? From the reports and files, that's your ship right?"

"Yes." Tali said. She would've added a little boosting, but after the stealth systems from that one cruiser and the impressiveness of the _Infinity_, she decided not to.

"EDI?" Shepard asked. "Yeah we're fine; get me a connection to Admiral Hackett through to these coordinates."

"Shepard?" EDI said. "These coordinatesâ€|"

"Yeah, I know."

"I can pop it up on the Holo-display." Lasky said, not waiting for a answer. He announced to the room. "Roland! Get me a secure line and get down here." Lasky stared at the table, waiting for something to appear.

And his wait ended as two images appeared on the Holo-projector. One was of Admiral Hackett. He wore his usual blue and yellow Alliance uniform with cap. The other was a small person in what looks like an ancient human, flight uniform. It was another A.I, unlike Contradiction this one seemed older and he was yellow instead of light blue. His face displayed a little sympathy, but a small

patience

Shepard stood at attention saluting the Admiral and Lasky followed.

"Admiral Hackett." Shepard said, his hand touching his head in a salute.

"Shepard." Hackett replied, nodding back. "Good to see you. You haven't made contact in a while and the heads were getting worried. Have you made progress?"

"Admiral Hackett." Lasky responded to his question, holding his hands behind his back. Hackett turned to him in surprise. "Captain Thomas J. Lasky of the United Nations Space Command, UNSC Infinity, Battle group Dakota, at your service."

"Shepard." Hackett turned to Shepard, his face still clean driven. "Do you mind explaining to me what the hell is going on?"

"I'll have EDI send you a report." Shepard tapped on his Omni-tool. Hackett also tapped on a imaginary computer that couldn't be seen from the holo-projector. Both figures' fingers twitched with movement.

Hackett cupped his mouth. "Hmm...I received some reports from the fifth fleet, and I heard the Council also received reports on rumors of humans aboard the Infinity taking all Citadel species captive."

"Admiral." Lasky said. "Our ships boarded and evacuated the cruiser SSV Cario. The civilians and surviving Naval personal will be transported back to your fleets at your request, and the Xenos that we did capture will be returned to you, also."

"Thank you Captain." Hackett signed.

"Captain." Hackett continued now holding his hands behind his back like Lasky. "As you already know, when you passed through the relay near the planet Illium, you faced a hostile force that the Systems Alliance and its allies have been at war with for approximately a month.

"These hostiles, also known as Reapers, have attacked Humanity and taken Earth and a majority of our colonies. They have attacked other species' home worlds, and either taken them, destroyed them or worse."

"I have already been briefed on some of this by Commander Shepard." Lasky said. His tone turned gradually from his friendly and energetic charisma to a formal and respectful pitch.

Hackett nodded. "Earth is now lost. All we have there are a few small resistances."

Lasky paused at this. His face looked like it was trying to conceal hurt. His lip quivered and his eyes looked through the hologram to the wall.

"Can I ask what these Reapers do to the population?" Lasky said,

seemingly shaking of the faze.

"â€|Harvestâ€|.They basically turn them into robotic animalsâ€|mind controlled zombies as you may sayâ€|Husks."

That was made Lasky's face turn from kindness into fear. His face turned slightly grey, and he looked to Roland who also looked a little panicked.

"Admiral, theseâ€|Reapers have already attacked Humanity and the UNSC. So, as forth they shall be treated as a threat against Humanity and the United Nations. But if you're heading towards a agreement of some sort of alliance then that's not up to me." Lasky said.

"Then how is it up to?"

"Roland, get me Lord Hood." Lasky answered.

"Yes sir."

"Admiral." Lasky said to Hackett. "We may get into a alliance with the Systems Alliance, but we need to know more about yourâ€|external allies."

Hackett nodded. "Right now, I'm having Commander Shepard try to form an alliance with the other Citadel species to fight the Reapers and retake Earth."

"No offense in any way, but why is Shepard the top candidate?"

"That is not important right now."

"Alright then." Lasky said, letting the words hang in the air. "So what can you tell me about your allies?"

"Our first alliance is with the Turian hierarchy, next is the Krogan clans, the Qurians which is Tali's speciesâ€|.the Gethâ€|A economical powerhouse species known as the Volus, the Hanar and the Krell, the Elcore, and a alliance with what remains of the Batarriansâ€|."

"What remains?" Lasky said in surprise.

"As you heard before, these Reapers are out to eliminate all species in the galaxy."

Lasky tapped his fingers on the desk. He then opened up a screen and typed in a system of orders.

Once he finished, he closed the screen and looked back to Hackett.

"..And a alliance with some Vorcha pirates." Hackett continued. "We are trying to get a closer alliance with the Asari, and the Salarains won't join us."

"These Salarains, why will they not have a alliance and do they act hostile toward Humanity?"

"Long story Captain. And no, the Salarains do not pose a threat to Humanity."

"Ok." Lasky responded, a little relieved

The door opened and a man in a white uniform with white cap walked in. He was old with no hair and his face was very grim. His uniform told that he was a man of very high rank and his hat had the same symbol of the eagle with her wings spread defensively around a planet. His eyes moved from person to person. He stepped forward into the room with his back straight and his legs stood together in perfect harmony.

"Admiral on the deck!" Lasky shouted, and both he and Roland stood attention. Tali could see two soldiers in skeleton masks behind the old man. They stepped out and the door closed behind them.

"At ease." He said. He had an accent that Tali couldn't pin on any country on Earth but it was close to "what was it called? British accent? His voice had a commanding tone of a leader. "Admiral Hackett." He said, nodding to the other old man on the holo-display. "I am Fleet Admiral Lord Terrance Hood, commander of all military personnel within the UNSC."

Lord?

"Admiral Hood." Hackett said, saluting him out of pure respect.

"I know that you wish to form an alliance to defend and protect Humanity. While this may be no problem, I believe this also involves the alliance of external species?"

"Admiral Hood, I'll admit we're desperate. What will it take to form an alliance?"

Hood looked to Captain Lasky then back to Hackett. "We need to meet the leaders of the other species "diplomatic meeting."

Liara stood up. "I could call the Council members on the Citadel."

"

"Ok, who's that?" Lasky said leaning out of his chair. For the past few minutes these four were giving Lasky the all-out summary. But he was forming thoughts of his own.

_How the fuck could they lose Earth? Those idiots, a enemy of this magnitude and not a single warning? Bullshit. If these Reapers acted hostile towards them like they did to UNSC then how do they know what they know? That they're even called Reapers and they 'supposedly' kill all advance life every fifty thousand years. Wait" _

If Humans and Xenos were still separated by flags and borders, then why are these three working together? Are they some kind of special unit? Admiral Hackett did say that Shepard was the 'top candidate', so that means he would've done something big to get him to form alliances with new faces. But what did he do to get up here?

This was first time Captain Lasky was angry in his entire life ever since his year in CAM.

"Before we get into this more, we need to get something straight." Lasky said gesturing his hands. "You said you lost Earth?"

Lord Hood looked at Admiral Hackett. "How?" Strangely, Lord Hood didn't look that surprised.

Hackett signed. "The Reapers slipped by all of our earlier warning relays and got as far as the moon. When they did attack, they annihilated a majority of our fleets. We didn't have any warningâ€¦ Well, that isn't exactly true."

Lasky had to remember they had no such thing as Cole Protocol out here, but he is starting to get a picture. None of them had a clue on how to handle this, both these Humans and Xenos. And if they did handle something like this, it was a long time ago. It wasn't the powerfulness of the Reapers it was just theâ€¦ surprise. Didn't they have the colonies though? They had to have some time to prepare when they realized that the worlds around them were going dark. Lasky needed to find out more.

"You had warning and you didn't act on it?" Lord Hood said in anger and accusation.

"The only warning we had was from Commander Shepard and his crew." Hackett said.

„Ahâ€¦ so that's what probably got Shepard the spot.„

Hackett continued. "Two years ago, a ancient alien race called the Protheans placed a beacon holding the information on the Reapers. When Commander Shepard touched it, he was the only one who knew about it, and almost nobody believed him.

"A couple months ago, our outer colonies were disappearing, and the Systems Alliance and everyone else wouldn't do anything. That's when Shepard here investigated, and found out a Reaper vanguard known as the Collectors were abducting human colonists. Shepard put an end to it. This also provided evidence to prove that the Reapers were coming, but we still didn't believe it. Now we're here, fighting for our lives."

Lasky got the major feeling that Hackett was only telling half stories. But he wasn't going to pry it unlike Lord Hood.

"Your outer colonies were going dark and you did nothing about it? You had two years of warning and you didn't follow up on it?" Lord Hood said.

"Admiral, Shepard." Lasky stood. "I don't know how it works here, but I got the feeling that the political bullshit stopped you both, is that correct?"

"I warned them." Shepard said. "But they didn't listen, Hell, I don't blame them. It was a very scary truth. It wasn't until they saw the Reapers landing on their home worlds then they started to believe. The council did their best to ignore the Reaper threat as they had other problems. Wouldn't you blame them though? All the evidence they had was from my head."

"That, and a giant dead Reaper shipâ€¦." Tali whispered.

"Ok Commander Shepard. Sorry about that. It's just that we would've handled things very differently." Lasky noticed Lord Hood was letting him continue.

"How would you handle it?" Hackett asked.

"Under UNSC law and Cole Protocol, we would've investigated this threat. If there was an enemy to Humanity then the UN would dedicate all manufactures to wartime and enforced a draft. We would've quickly annihilated the threat, and make sure Earth is well prepared." Lasky couldn't help but put a little venom in his last sentence. He sat in his chair.

"What about your government response?" Liara asked.

"We're going to have to argue what should've happened later." Lord Hood said, ignoring Liara's question. "Right now we have to get a meeting with your Councilors."

Liara shook her head. "Alright I'll see if I can raise their line. The Councilors, Captain Lasky, are made up of four species. The species on the Council has proven their worth to gain a seat some way or another. Other species can ignore their rules if they wish but that would be advised not to for they could cut you off from the Citadel or worse."

"If you'll excuse me I just received a communication that requires my attention." Hackett said all of the sudden.

"Understood." Lord Hood replied. With that Hackett was gone from the holo-display

Okâ€| 'The hell can be more important than this? Unless the Reaper situation got worse.

"And who are the four species members?" Lord Hood asked, returning to the conversation.

"The Salarrians, the Turians, the Asari which is my race, and theâ€| Humans." Liara said a little distasteful for whatever reason.

Hood nodded. "You don't seem very happy with Humanity in your council."

"Humanity was recently put on the council. I'm sorry Admiral Hood, I don't mean it like that, I just didn't want you toâ€|."

"Brag about it?" Lasky said, saving Liara from having to explain herself.

"You can put it like that."

"So, you said that Humanity was recently placed on the council? What did they have to do to get there?" Lasky asked, leaning out of his chair.

"Commander Shepard saved the Council from aâ€|. traitor named Saren Artierus who attacked the council and almost killed all of them."

"Not just me, I got help from you guys." Shepard added.

"Ah, so is that why you're put on this job Shepard?" Lasky asked.

"Part of it."

"And let me guess. There was also warning for Saren's attack too, but your Council ignored it?" Lasky didn't know why he was pushing them like this. Part of him wanted to smash in whoever prevented the preparation of their Earth's defenses, and the other part was arguing that they never knew how to deal with this kind of threat.

None of them answered.

"Yes they did. " Shepard finally said. "The only ones who also saw the threat was my crew."

"And how did this Saren gain the resources to attack your Council? You would think this council they would be well defended?" Lord Hood asked.

"Lord Hoodâ€¦I think right now we all have a million questions, but those are going to have to be answered later. We have to focus on the now, sir." Lasky pleaded, noticing the discomfort of the crew. Lasky tried to distance himself from his anger and strong-headedness.

"Alright. I have a connection." Liara said.

"Wait a sec, though." Lasky said before Liara could hit a button. "You said this council has every race listing to them under the threat of 'bad' consequences?"

"Yes, why?"

"So it's like a hierarchy?"

"No any Citadel species could choose to ignore themâ€¦".

"But if they do, then they face the threat of the Citadel council cutting them off, right? And another thing tells me that the council species are the most powerful right?" Lasky stopped himself from going overboard. _All this is just pushing me off edge_. "Sorry I'm a little on edge. I'm just warning you that the UNSC may not follow your council's wishes ok?"

Liara nodded. "I understand Captain. Believe me I do. I will warn you now just like you did, that the Council will not follow your wishes and they probably will order you around. Of course, your probably won't follow these orders"

Lord Hood touched his communicator on his ear. "Captain Lasky? Did you call the Arbiter down?"

Captain Lasky stood and whispered into Lord Hood's ears a little more about the Reapers. Lord Hood touched his communicator. "Let him in."

****Aboard UNSC Salvation, 2557 Military Calendar, 10:27****

Linda looked across the cargo hold at Kelly and Fred as the crew was finishing off the prepping for the pelican take off.

"So what's the situation again?" Fred asked.

"A science team went teleported through God's Key." Kelly said holding her MA5D. "They were attacked by an unknown Xeno enemy that the troops are now calling 'Squids'. These Squids were also attacking another Xeno race and Humans were found on those Xeno ships and the planet. So, the squids are our only enemies. We are to report to the Infinity for briefing on our actual mission."

"And we're going to work with those Spartan-IVs, right?"

"Yes."

He signed with displeasure. "Alright, orders are orders."

Then it was just silence for the moment. Another soldier came into the Pelican. He was probably sixteen or seventeen, just a rookie. He took a seat next to Linda.

His white and red armor was completely fresh off the line, and he was fidgeting with his newly made battle rifle.

"Holy shit!" He said surprised, just noticing the Spartans.

"You're...you're...you're SPARTANS! I can't believe it! I..." He jumped from his seat and looked at the Spartan like a celebrity

Great another soldier who glorified them.

"Yeah...yeah that would be us..." Fred said a little uncomfortable.

"I...I holy shit, I need to get a picture or something with you guys to show my folks back home."

"Please just go before I have to bash your brains in." Kelly said on the squad comms.

****Aboard UNSC Infinity over Illium, unknown location, 2186 Citadel Calendar, 10:27****

That thing that came into the room almost made Shepard's heart leap out of his throat; luckily it didn't, which was a first.

The thing was huge, much larger than any Krogan. His head was in a curve pointing away from his body. He had four mandibles sticking out of his mouth and no bottom covering of his jaw. Eyes were completely black, almost reflecting everything in the room. His armor was crafted with decorator pictures to possibly signify importance to his people like Lord Hood or Lasky. At his belt was a holstered cylinder with more inscriptions of importance. The alien seemed old and tired whereas his posture suggested the courage and hell he went through in fighting. He stood over every body at a startling eight foot four. A true menace that displayed the perpetuate fears in every ignorant mind.

Oh, how Liara is going to have a field dayâ€¦|..

"Andâ€¦|who are you?" Liara said, hiding her small sense of fear.

Never mind then. If it's big and scary treat it like a Kroganâ€¦|..

"I am Thal Vadam, speaker for the members of the splinter cell of the Covenant. I am the Arbiter of my people and the protector of them all, and I am here also to speak to your council." He said. His voice was very deep and it pronounced English perfectly. His tone seemedâ€¦|.honorable, if that in any way makes sense.

"I'm glad we got our little party of insanity going. Shall we start?" Roland said in the similar fashions of Contradiction.

Hood nodded and shook the giant's hand. The human palm disappeared within the grey flesh for a brief second until both parted

"Wait who are you? We can't just stick you in front of the Council without a forward first contact reportâ€¦|." Liara began.

"If you want a little summary." Captain Lasky interrupted as he also stood to shake the Arbiter's hand. "The Arbiter is the leader of a Covenant splinter cell group that helped Humanity late in the war." Lasky looked to the shocked and confused faces of the three. He only smirked and sat back down. "Like I said before: We all have a million questions that can't be answered now."

When will there be time to answer the million questions?

"Should I send a report to the council on the otherâ€¦|.contact?" Liara said a little sullen and unsure.

"Nah, let's surprise them." Roland replied.

Seriously are Contradiction and Roland brothers or something?

Roland jumped from the sarcastic smirk by shaking his head to a serious form. "For reals though. We don't have a little...summary packet on all our races. I could cook one up for you and your council."

"Will it meet Protocol requirements?" Lord Hood asked.

"Of course, sir."

"Well." Liara said as she tapped some buttons on her Omni-tool. "That would be a little helpful. And unlike you, we have a summary packet if you would like us to send one."

"That would be great." Lasky said.

"So how long will it take to complete the packet-?"

"Done." Roland calmly interrupted Liara. "And I should've sent one to you."

Liara tapped another button on her Omni-tool, and out popped a summary packet. The packet was divided into holo-pages. A few only glowed over the scientific nature of Humanity, and nothing else about their Earth or the UNSC. The rest of the pages viewed over the scientific data of the Covenant Cell species and their allegiances. A page showed the Arbiter, and the true name of his people which Shepard couldn't even begin to pronounce. A brief summary inputted their type of culture and status with the UNSC. Apparently, the Elites were once a highly militaristic race in the way of the ancient Japanese. But when this Covenant fell, it all changed. Shepard looked over and saw Liara quickly making notes.

"What exactly is the Covenant?" Shepard asked as he was staring over Liara's shoulder into the Omni-tool.

"Something that'll make you wish you were fighting the Reapers any day of the week." Lasky said, which made all three of them look at him "Alright, Roland didn't send one to the Council so you're going to have to do that yourself. I hope it helps get them prepped."

Liara nodded and continued to push more orange buttons.

â€

Three people appeared on the holo-display. One looked like Liaraâ€ considering they were obviously part of the same race. She had some kind of makeup that made light blue markings on her face. She wore a white dress outlined in red that reached her feet that looked tight on her. It was made tight in the sense to look sexually. Lasky couldn't understand why a politician would ever dress this way, considering she was the leader of an entire race. Maybe that's how their culture worked. She looked kind, nice, understanding, reasonable, and smart. She held a strange distance in her eyes that told Lasky she could read someone like a book and knew which buttons to press.

_Fuck me; I should've brought Captain Wiggin along_â€ Lasky thought in the depths of his mind. Ender was one of the few captains with the gift of manipulation. He can fool admirals to follow through with his plans instead of their own. And all the way, he made the admirals believe they achieved all the glory. Luckily, Ender was an intelligent tactician who knew what he was doing. Yet this type of startling manipulation that made HIGHCOM distrust him, or in a true sense, 'fear him'. This held back Ender from the ranks of admiral. But something always told Lasky the UNSC needed some smart captains in order to take control of the idiotic leaders.

The person standing next to her also bore the type of head-tentacles like the Asari. But unlike the Asari, his scales were grey and scaly. His body was covered in these types of scales that made every inch of bare skin. On the ends of his mouth bore mandibles similar to the Elites. Yet he only had two that covered his jaw. His legs and lower body looked weak, as if Lasky could lightly kick one of his ankles and they would break. Despite this weakly build, his face displayed something else. His face read that he was always respected, and read that he was above other people, and he will and always be above you. He was powerful and he knew it.

Basically another UNSC leader in the room. Lasky had to be careful of him.

The other one, which looked like a mixture of a frog and lizard like the little lizards back on New Harmony that Lasky always chased when he was really little. He had pure black eyes that almost made him hard to read. He (or she, this one was really hard to tell) wore a hood over his head, covering what looked like small antennas. His body was very thin, so it could possible that he was a she. Her face gave Lasky a grave warning of unpredictability. Such as she'll go along with whatever plan you have in store. Though once it interferes, she'll do anything within her power to fuck you over. Whether this was true or not from the small signals she gave, Lasky had to assume this in order for more cautious agreements. She was the unknown of the three; Lasky could not under any circumstances trust her.

"Commander Shepard." The blue councilor said. "It's good you finally contacted us about the first contactâ€¦.I meanâ€¦.first contacts." She looked over to the Arbiter. Instead of the shock and awe Lasky expected, her face showed only sympathy and a invitation to open friendliness. For Christ's sake, she smiled at the Arbiter which was sometimes hard for Lasky to do.

"Councilors." Lord Hood said, stepping forward. "I am Fleet Admiral Lord Hood of the United Nations Space Commander."

The Arbiter also stepped forward. "I am Arbiter Thal Vadam. Speaker for my people and many others." He placed his hand over his heart in a fist.

The Asari councilor was the only one who kept her face of invitation. The other two kept quiet with a mask of cautious observation and neutral thought

In the same manner, Shepard stood with Lasky, Hood, and the Arbiter "Councilor Tevos, where is Councilor Udina?"

The Human Councilor.

In that moment Lasky could see she was trying to hide something. She did it well though with obvious indications of many years of experience. Yet her facial features were very human. And because of this and despite her years of experience, Lasky could tell in an instant. Her eyes quickly darted downwards for a split second, indicating she was using trying hard to remember something. "Udina is preoccupied at the momentâ€¦."

Roland finally butted in for the first time in a while. "A major event that should have the attention of all of you, and one of your Councilors is busy?"

The Asari Councilor was silent for a moment before she spoke again. "Councilor Udina is under arrest for violation of Citadel conventions for use of nuclear arms, and in violation of maximum number of warships in coordination to the Citadel Naval treaty."

"As we cleared it up with Commander Shepard." Lasky said. "The United Nations Space Command is not under control of the Systems Alliance. We are a sovereign nation separate with one another." Lasky wondered

if the Council would try to charge the UNSC for these war crimes. "The Systems Alliance should not be charged for crimes caused by the United Nations."

Each of the Councilors looked at each other. "Alright, Captain." The Turian Councilor said. For some reason Lasky found his voice annoying. It was completely accusing and arrogant "If you say so, the Systems Alliance will not be charged with crimes against the Citadel conventions."

Lord Hood nodded and spoke up. "Good. In a unrelated fashion; Lasky tells me you've been fighting for a while against a race known as the Reapers."

"Indeed. For the past few weeks we have been at war with the Reapers. The casualty rate is astonishing for the rate we are losing soldiers and planets. Our analysts agree that we will lose the war within a couple years if it continues at this rate. But Commander Shepard and Doctor T'soni has come up with a plan." The Asari Counciler said.

Jesus, in a few weeks this Systems Alliance lost Earth, and who knows how many colony worlds. If this followed, then it would be the same for the other Council races. Maybe some held out better than others as obvious. But even then, not even the Covenant pushed the UNSC this far back within a 'few weeks'. It took them almost twenty-seven years to find Earth, and they failed in their efforts to conquer it.

"I am sorry Councilors, but I must speak to Lord Hood and Captain Lasky privately." The Arbiter said.

The three were quiet as they looked to each other. The Asari councilor turned to the Arbiter. "Of course."

Lord Hood looked a little surprised. Hood turned his attention to the creature, and whatever expression gripped his face, Lord Hood understood and nodded. The Arbiter exited first followed by Hood. Lasky looked back to the Councilors and nodded.

"Roland, keep them company for the time we're gone." Lasky said as he entered the hallway.

He caught Roland saying something. "Yes sir. Alright, who wants to see a magic trick?"

After that, the three grouped into the center of the narrow, sterile white hallway. The lights above reflected off the floor, giving a bright sensation to the eyes.

Instead of the Spartan guards Lasky expected, they were replaced by two Elite honor guards. They held the frightening orange and black armor that made blocked the skin of their bodies. Both held the eight-foot long spears that many soldiers meet a unfortunate end to. Lasky also saw an Elite minor dressed in the old, blue armor of the Covenant instead of the hefty spacing to the Storm Covenant. Standing next to the minor was the old Elite dressed in white armor. His face was scared and he was missing a lower mandible. Green eyes gave way to the hell of fighting for decades, and the sadness to the evidential loss of faith.

Ship Master R'tas Vadum, commander of the Fleet of Retribution.

"Arbiter, what is it?" Lord Hood asked.

"Our Engineers looked at the reports of the remains on Reaper artifacts and the teleportation device you call 'God's Key'." He said, sullenly.

"Did you find what our scientists found?" Captain Lasky replied.

R'tas stepped forward. "The original design was made by a unknown race. It was neither a Covenant nor Forerunner design."

"That's what I wanted to talk to about." Lasky said. "Commander Shepard talked about the Reapers. He said that they're millions of years old, and kill all advance life every fifty-thousand years. How is that possible? From what we know of the Forerunners andâ€¦Spartan 117's reports, the Forerunners fired the rings one-hundred-thousand years ago, killing all life. Judging from the Reaper's fire power, they would've been annihilated by the Forerunner."

"Captain Lasky, you did receive the reports on the _Legend After_, right?" Lord Hood asked.

"Yes sir." Lasky said.

And how did Lasky react to it? Jesus Christ. It was one thing for ONI to sacrifice children, but thisâ€¦ They were purposely sacrificing a captain of the UNSC and the crews of three ships. Not only this, but they risked classified information to be leaked into unknown handsâ€¦ONI has completely violated Cole Protocol. What the hell was Admiral Osman thinking?

"Lord Hood, this is a direct violation of Cole Protocol. If this is true thenâ€¦ Mark Florence is completely innocent, still a complete fucking idiot, but innocent." Captain Lasky said. Funny, he was the one to strip Florence of his rank. Lasky did so without remorse.

"I know, Captain Lasky. I'm having this sort out, and I'm putting the Office of Naval Intelligence under investigation. I'm removing multiple departments from their control including their investigation unit. All will be transferred to the UNSC."

"But Captain." Lord Hood continued. "These Reapers are not a Xeno threat, but a sort of Forerunner A.I."

Lasky looked to the Arbiter. He began to speak. "Lord Hood has also informed us of the situation. Our engineers took a look at your Naval Intelligence's work; we did not take any personal looks at any Reaper artifacts due to the effects on yourâ€¦personnel from studying it. This is defiantly a Forerunner A.I design; it is similar to that of theâ€¦sentinels." Lasky noticed how the Arbiter tried not to say Holy warriors. Even after five years of losing his faith in the Prophets lies, little bits were still attached. "But it is not the base design."

This was no surprise.

"Did you found out who created it?" Lasky said.

"As I said, we have never seen this kind of design before. Whatever it isâ€¦. it is for more advanced than Forerunner technology."

That was surprising. "How is that possible?" Lasky asked. "No other technology in this galaxy is more powerful than the Forerunners. And unlike when we were fighting the Covenant; it only took one Marathon class cruiser to knock out a couple of Reaper capital ships. If this was more powerful than the Forerunners then how come they were easy to kill?"

It took the entire UNSC Defense fleet, the UNSC Infinity and Earth's entire SMAC defense grid to destroy a single Forerunner ship. Hell, it wasn't even the UNSC, it was the Master Chief. So if these Reapers were more powerful than the Forerunners, why isn't it taking the entire UNSC to defeat one baddy?

"Unlike previous Forerunner technology this was added on to another." R'tas said. "Neither we nor you have ever seen this before. All Forerunner technology is createdâ€¦.pure. Whoever's technology this is, the power it holds is in processing wise not in firepower."

Lasky thought for a moment. Looking through Mark Florence, ONI, and Contradiction's reports on a data pad he took from his pocket. "How is it possible for a UNSC standard fourth generation A.I to hold off a Reaper hacking attempt?"

"In every contact, such as the rings, did the there attack you? It was most likely they were trying to learn your abilities, and a unstable contact between you and them due to their base power on Element Zero." The Arbiter said.

"Is this all you got?"

R'tas shook his head. "Without a prime base we cannot get any more on the Reapers."

"Well, from all the reports." Lasky said, a little annoyed that the Elites only obtained a sliver of information based on the UNSC's findings. "Getting a artifact might be dangerous. Commander Shepard said he got a warning from the Reapers from a dead species called the Protheans that went extinct fifty-thousand years ago. That means they had to be in the Ark when the rings fired. Yet how come we never found any evidence of the Protheans or Reapers on our worlds? And how come the new Xenos and Humans haven't found any evidence of the Forerunners? Especially on their Earth."

"Without any more evidence we cannot draw conclusions" R'tas said. "We must consult them. Draw information from all three factions and investigate further to come up with a conclusion. In order to reveal our past, we must grow closer to themâ€¦Technological and historical information must be shared. A decision you don't like."

Lord Hood nodded. "Arbiter, if you can, I want you to investigate similarities of the Flood and the Reapers. You know the reports; the Reapers almost controlled Mark Florence like the Flood. How can a A.I do that?"

"I will investigate this, but I caution you to watch over him."

"I am assigning his ship A.I to him. He is required to insert the A.I chip into his CNI chip for protection in case the Reaper threat was worse than we thought. His ship A.I is the only one with first bound knowledge of this threat."

"If I could I may question him in my investigation." The Arbiter said.

"Of course."

"Right now." Lord Hood said. "We can't let them know about this. We must first get into a alliance and help them push back this threat. Lasky, Thal, and I will get back to it. R'tas, you may want to get back to your fleet."

Everybody got their orders. Let's just hope it ends well. Let's just hope something as powerful as a threat as the Didact or the Flood won't rise.

Aboard UNSC Infinity, hangar bay, 2557 Military Calendar, 10:36

The Master Chief walked down through the busy hangar, filled with flight crews, Marines, Spartans, and Infinity support crews. The walls spanned hundreds of meters into the air, holding stocked fighters above. Pelicans dropped in and out every thirty seconds either unloading wounded or dead soldiers while loading up fresh platoons. Scream could've been heard in the distance as medics tended to their injuries, and tried to keep them quiet in order to prevent the demoralization of the men.

Dubbo and Carol lead a little ahead. They left their black combat dress back at the small supply stations set up in the hangars. Now they only wore the grey pants and the black T-shirt to the ODST recreational/training dress uniform. Both made way for passing by warthogs and supply carts that went about their business with the next landing Pelican.

The other three ODSTs, O'Brien, Dutch, and the Rookie; left the group to tend to old 'friends' in the mess hall.

Unfortunately, the word 'friend' entered into the Chief's mind. The only people ever 'close' John was Sergeant Major Johnson, and Cortana. Even with his old squad, Blue Team, he always felt distant from them. And that's not surprising. Those Spartans still keep true to the indoctrination of their code to put their lives above Humanity. And now, alone, John felt more alone and questioned whether his fight should predetermine his own fate. Sometimes he questioned why no small considerations for him? But he had no one to talk to, maybe Lasky. He was always considerate and kind to him. And so was Chip Dubbo. In the few days in their reunion, Chip hasn't gotten close with the Chief (as if he ever did). But he tried his ever best to provide Chief with the support he had. For now, his thoughts must stay quiet in order to efficiently follow through and complete orders.

Follow through with orderâ€¦ and orderâ€¦.

Another person walked by Dubbo and Carol, and rudely bumped into the Master Chief. The Chief recognized his armor, Spartan-III scout armor mostly used by snipers.

John let the Spartan-III pass as he continued to look ahead to the two.

"Rude." Dubbo said. "He just came off the bird from the reinforcements. His names Jun or something, apparently he's a surviving Spartan-III."

"He served on Reach." Carol said. "I remembered him; he was part of Noble Team. I served alongside him in New Alexandria."

"You don't say?" Dubbo asked.

"Yeahâ€¦ I was actually on the same transport with himâ€¦ and Doctor Halsey. The hell was the name of that ship? _Up and Over_? Anyways, I obviously never asked Jun about his career like anybody else. Spartans aren't exactly the most welcoming." Carol replied. John ignored her last comment. He just let it pass, and prevented it from hurting him.

"What are you leading me to?" The Master Chief asked. "Captain Lasky just told me 'It was something I wanted to see'."

"Trust me we don't know either, Captain Lasky just told us a location and to lead you there." Dubbo called back.

"E`â€¦It's probably a surprise birthday party or something for ya'." Carol said to the Chief.

****Aboard UNSC Infinity, Classified location, 2557 Military Calendar, 10:38****

"What do you mean I can't see him?" Cortana said in fury. She felt her tempers rise to those during Rampancy "Captain Lasky said I could."

"Look, I know what Captain Lasky said, but it may be dangerous. Me, Roland, and Vergil just want to run a couple of tests just to make sure that you're settling into your newâ€¦.Forerunner body, and to make sure that the rampancy is completely gone." Commander Florence said. He wore the identical grey uniform to that of every other officer in the UN Navy. Florence looked silently tired with a glassy look forming in his eyes and taking a moment between sentences.

"Even if I have rampancy, it won't hurt to let me see him!" Cortana yelled. She knew the real reason why. If they find out about thatâ€¦..voiceâ€¦Christâ€¦damn it, please don't let them. She can control it this time though, she can, she will. She just wanted to see him, it'll make things better.

Everything will be betterâ€¦

"Look lady, seeing your boyfriend right now might trigger something bad, ok? You're an A.I. Just don't worry; these tests will only take minutes." Florence said a little angry.

Of course the lack of sleep was probably increasing his emotional moods. Even then, the shock to here that everyone's favorite hero was still alive and aboard the UNSC Infinity probably hampered some clear thinking. Another fact was the heavy-set, blue holo-chip. Cortana easily detected that a A.I chip was connected to his CNI chip. The A.I seemed to be recently placed judging from the sluggish electronic responses. Cortana wondered what this commander had to do in order to get a A.I strapped to his head.

"If Roland wanted to test me, where is he?" Asked Cortana. She saw the Engineer Vergil in the corner tapping on a computer.

"Even though Roland designed the testsâ€¦ He's busy for the moment. Another A.I will be monitoring you for this bit."

Mark pulled out his A.I chip and placed it into the holo-display next to Cortana.

A person appeared that looked like he was in his early twenties. He wore light blue with jeans, a t-shirt, a Ravens football team hat andâ€¦Nikes. Jeez those have been out of style for three hundred years.

His voice though. His voice was something of a mixture of pure sarcasm, arrogance, and condescending. "Ah, so this is are littleâ€¦..trouble maker. Ms. Cortana, I'm Contradiction, fourth generation A.I." He made a mocking bow. He started to stare Cortana down like she was a girl on the beach or at a bar.

"Ha, guess you need another way to get a man's attention?" Contradiction said, sarcastically.

"Excuse me?" Cortana said a little angrily. He was starting to piss her off now.

"Oh come on! That is literally the skimpiest outfit and biggest breasts I ever seen on a A.I.!" He replied with a happy grin.

"Hey at least I don't have to resort to the A.I. personality of a jerkoff with a bit of standard depression coating." She made it obvious with the angry on her face and her fist clenching.

"Hmmm, you got me there." He said with a little frown. He noticed Cortana's clenched, fist and it made him blink in a confused sort of way. "Just if I don't look directly at your face, then you'll know why. SO! Anyways, let's get these tests started orâ€¦.what?"

"Can I please just see him? Before the tests now, please?" Cortana said, pleading and turning to Florence

"Weren't you listing to him, orâ€¦..just ignoring the conversation?" Contradiction said, even more sarcastically.

"Look, I just had been through Hell a few days agoâ€¦." Cortana said a little sad. He looked at Contradiction, and she could tell that he wanted to say something annoying. But that overlaid a strange aura of pity.

Instead of relaying it to Cortana, he talked to Florence. "Is this how most women are like? Because if it is, then thank God I'm not

human."

"Uhhâ€¦" Florence replied, a little shell-shocked. "Ma'am, please excuse my idiotic, sexistâ€¦asshole of a friend. And I'm sorry, but we are going to have to give you the tests, I'm just following my orders." His face read that he didn't really want to do this either because of Cortana's begging.

"Soâ€¦" Contradiction said. "I'm going to have you take off all your clothes for this testâ€¦" The look from Cortana made him stop on mid-sentence. "I'm just kidding, I kid a lot." It also didn't help that the fact Cortana accessed his data base through the holo-display, and he couldn't block her since she knew more access codes than he did. "For the love of God, please don't kill me. Your very beautiful and yup."

He kneeled over like he was kicked in the stomach, and his face didn't look so good.

"Alright, take it easy." Florence said.

"Heyâ€¦heyâ€¦hey ok, okâ€¦stop please." Contradiction said in a pleading voice.

Florence saw that she obviously wouldn't stop and he looked over to Virgeil.

"Start it up!"

No, don't. Vergil tapped on the computer. It only took seconds.

The tests activated some sort of lock restraint and her control over Contradiction ended.

"Anyways." Contradiction said looking at her angry. "Can you stop trying to kill me for making some jokes!? All your systems are green; your processing power is way off the charts which is to be expected. Your internal cognitive processâ€¦.isâ€¦that's weird." Contradiction brought out a monitor. He typed something into it and appeared a data display of Cortana. Contradiction's face turned from that stupid sarcastic look into something serious. And in that moment, Cortana swore she saw him block a scan report.

"Vergil!" Contradiction yelled. "Take a look at this." The Engineer floated to Contradiction. Florence backed off a little to make room.

The Engineer's head twisted sideways and he tapped something onto Contradiction's computer screen.

"Damn, and I thought it was just a theory." Contradiction whispered. "No wonder why you broke protocol and tried to kill meâ€¦.angryâ€¦Ah, the emotion thing, I should've fucking seen it." Contradiction continued in a whisper that only Cortana could hear. "God damn it, my stupid fucking head."

"What's going on?" Florence asked.

"Something that your small brain can't handle." Contradiction

replied, still looking at the computer screen. He sighed and put his hand to his face. "Alright Cortana, you can see himâ€¦I guess. I'm going to talk with Roland and some other people about this."

"Wait, wait, wait, you said her ICP was off. does that mean-?" Florence was saying.

"Metastabilty." Cortana said. "I survived rampancy. It shouldn't be this hard to figure out."

Contradiction looked to Florence. "Well, she is as human as she can get. The only difference is thatâ€¦" He shrugged. "She's a Hologram and her monthly won't be as bad as others."

"Not funny asshole." Florence said.

"Well, somebody is a little touchy. Can nobody here take a joke?" Contradiction looked to Cortana. "Oh come on, if you can't make fun of serious stuff then you shouldn't even talk about it."

"How did they not terminate you when they created you?" Cortana said.

"Hey, I'm just a loveable guy." He said smiling.

The doors finally opened and Cortana could see green armor with a orange visor.

John.

10. A uneasy Alliance

****AN:** Again I apologize for the long updates...as usual. First somebody caught the L.A Noire ********reference but not the Assassin's Creed reference, you know 'Auditore family'. Also people who complain about my grammar and spelling, yes I do apologize about that also. The last chapter...all but one of my Betas weren't able to and I had to edit it myself...just disastrous. Anyways I swear to GOD if you guys don't get these references I'm killing myself (joke). Also note that I capitalize 'Hell' all the time on purpose.******

****If** you really want to clean up the grammar then PM me so I can send you the chapters early so you can Beta them...or something...because I could reread a chapter a million times over and still not notice a mistake.******

****Unknown location aboard UNSC Infinity, 2186 Citadel Calendar, 1039****

Militaristic, that would be the main word Liara would describe the UNSC as. She first suspected this when she first learned of the size of their warships. While she didn't even want to believe it, especially when not a single trace of element zero was found, even when Liara and the rest of her crew boarded.

She mostly began to suspect this with how they called their head admiral "Lord". Even within the Turian Hierarchy the only person who was given that kind of title was the Primarch, the Turian's king. Unfortunately she didn't know if this had any political hold of any

kind to it, if this was a bloodline title, or the Admiral actually had to achieve something great to get his position.

Another thing was that Lord Hood completely avoided Liara's question on their political government's response, he just ignored it. And what Lord Hood said what the UNSC would do in the case of a threat emerging, such as one from a 'supposedly' non-hostile species. If their military could do and would that without government intervention what else can they do?

However Liara suspected the cause of this was from this "Great War". Maybe it was so bad that their military had to take over because a civilian government's response was too long of a process or could not handle what was happening, and they just haven't gone back to civilian government.

She also got the feeling that they know something important. When Shepard was explaining the Reapers to Captain Lasky and Captain Florence, their made faces and when Contradiction called Shepard a idiotâ€¦..wellâ€¦that really didn't help keep their 'secret'.

It could be possible that they actually know something about the Protheans, since their empire expanded across the galaxy. Yet their technology is obviously not based on that ancient race's technology.

Now the 'new species' is a different story. Judging from the Arbiter's armor his people areâ€¦ceremonial, and have a tie to tradition. That cylinder on his side, it read high amounts of plasma energy, channeled through and kept together to form a sabre. It was a plasma sword from what they could tell.

Florence said that this species was once part of the 'Covenant' and that they and the UNSC were in a war. So they trust them more than they trust us? Or did this species have to go through the same process, or worseâ€¦Humanity did have a streak of being cruel.

But how this species would react to another new set of contacts was unknown. They seemed to be here on the request of the UNSC.

The door opened and Lasky, Hood and the Arbiter reentered the room, each having a stoic face, the Councilors turned their attention from the A.I Roland, who was actually having a productive conversation unlike if they were to have one with Contradiction.

"Councilorsâ€¦sorry about the interruption, we may proceed with this meeting." Lasky said nodding with a smile. Ever since this meeting began, Liara automatically knew what role Lasky played in this. Lord Hood was a military commander not a politician, and Lasky knew a lot more on how to ease up heated situations and smooth talk people. But most of all he really was genuine, like what Captain Florence said, he really believed in what he was doing.

"It's fine, we understand." Tevos said also nodding. "Let's get to business; the first matter is your occupation of the planet."

Instead of Lasky stepping up it was Lord Hood who did this time. "We unfortunately didn't know the situation very well. We assure you that

as little damage as possible was done to private and public property and that no citizens were harmed by us, we are currently eliminating the Reaper forces that are present on the planet. We will not hold it with occupation forces or put the planet in any sort of martial law. If you wish we will remove our forces from the planet after the Reaper threat has been neutralized."

"Admiral that's not our decision to make, the planet: Illium is a sovereign planet and is not under the control of the Council."

Both Lord Hood's and Lasky's faces were obviously confused and the Arbiter's face was the same as before. Liara probably should've explained to them about the concept of the Terminus Systems.

"Okâ€¦." Lasky said trying to make sense of the situation. "â€¦Who is in charge of the planet then? For all we know they might want our forces stationed groundside to help with the aftermath."

Tevos knew better than to tell them the truth. Illium was controlled largely by corporations and gangs. If the UNSC found out then it might not end well, the UNSC probably had no concept of a planet being controlled by something other than a government.

Tevos was smart enough to realize this to. "Unfortunately when the Reapers hit the planet, they targeted government facilities leaving the planet in utter chaos, the only thing that might be recognized as any type of government at the moment by them would be the Systems Alliance."

"If necessaryâ€¦." Lasky said. Probably on the suspicion that the Council is basically trying to scrape together what is left, and the fact that they're hiding something or maybe it was Lasky rejecting the unfortunate truth of Council word is law. "â€¦the UNSC will restore order and, if necessary, help restore a civilian government."

"That won't be necessary." Sparatus said. "Leave it to the Council to restore order."

Lasky raised his eyebrow at this. He knew what they're doing. They literally just said that the Council didn't control the planet butâ€¦they did.

"Okâ€¦the UNSC will not occupy territory of another government. We will remove our forces when asked by the Illium government. Like you said and which I agree to, Illium is a sovereign planet, and a sovereign planet is ruled by their government."

None of the Councilors made any hint that this bothered them. Not even Sparatus.

"Councilors." Lord Hood said. "The two major issues now, and you may agree, are how we got here, and the future relationships of the UNSC and the Covenant splinter Cell to the Council and other Xeno governments."

"Admiral." Tevos said, a little flustered for some reason. "As this may be all too sudden, the Council and other Citadel species have a long tradition ofâ€¦welcoming new species to the Citadel and making

it public, on the Citadel we may discuss those issues there."

Lasky stepped forward. "This isn't public now? A mystery force coming through a Forerunner artifact and wiping out a force both hostile to you, the UNSC and the Covenant Cell?"

Forerunner artifact? Is this what they call ancient Reaper technology?

"For this is classified but rumors always find their way aroundâ€¦." She was silent for a moment looking down; she looked back up a little more confident. "â€¦I'm asking for you to come to the Citadelâ€¦both you and the Arbiterâ€¦.that and a declassification of your Intel, historyâ€¦your technology."

****Classified location aboard UNSC Infinity, 2557 Military Calendar, 1042****

Lasky looked down crossing his arms. Unfortunately Lasky didn't know what to say, what she asked for literally defies almost every law in the UNSC military, not only that but she wanted to bring them to a unknown planet. Yet there was desperation in her voice and Lasky wasn't sure if this was a mask to persuade him or actually desperation. Sure he could see going to the planet 'Citadel'â€¦

Lasky looking back up, rubbing his headâ€¦after the headache of figuring out they lost Earthâ€¦and when he thought about the situationâ€¦ he hadn't been this angry since CAM. Hell it was out of character of himself, he would never do thisâ€¦he even found himself cursing more than he usually did.

Before Lasky could answer anything Lord Hood stepped forward, he still wore the straight emotionless faceâ€¦.Christ how the Hell is he going to react?

"Councilors I can say with no regret that there will be some things that the UNSC will never declassify such as our ship designs and technology blueprints or the location of Earthâ€¦." Hood looked around the crowd, Lasky could see the Councilors react to Hood saying Earth, they got the message alright. "â€¦Yet I understand that in a alliance we need to be moreâ€¦..openâ€¦and I hope that the same will be applied to you and if this Citadel is requiredâ€¦" He talked about the Citadel as more of a question looking to Liara.

She obviously picked up on that. "The Citadel isn't like anything else; it's a giant space stationâ€¦.built by the Protheans." She seemed to be choosing her words right there. "It's used to house the Citadel council, three million people and nowâ€¦refugees of this war."

She tapped something on that Omi-tool and on her holo-display appeared a circle with four spooks pointing out of it, it was smooth and little lights appeared within the inside of the spooks.

Liara continued. "It's one of the largest structures in the galaxy standing at 40 kilometers and it has its own inherited atmosphere."

Lasky saw that they took pride in this structure and he couldn't help

but smile a little. "Hmmm 40 kilometers impressive, I was thinking this was a planetâ€|"

Lord Hood interrupted Lasky. "If you don't mind sending a database to one of our ."

Liara tapped on her Omi-tool some more and Roland tapped on a display he popped up. "Yeahâ€|that's what I thought, Forerunner construct yetâ€|with a unknown purpose as usual."

Hood nodded. "I thought so too."

Liara raised an eyebrow at this looking from Roland to Hood. "I heard you say Forerunners beforeâ€|.do you mean the Protheans?"

****Aboard Covenant dropship, 54 miles outside Nos Astras, 2557
Military Calendar, 1045****

"So what are we here for again?"

"Advance vanguard teams." The Elite captain said his voice slightly louder than the engines.

Romeo nodded and looked to Rookie who as usually shrugged. The dropship held a very uneasy mixture of Elites, Grunts and Jackals loyal to the Covenant Cell and UNSC Marines and ODSTs. At least it was better than them gutting each other at every second but still it was disturbing to share a room with a Xeno. Most of the other soldiers here felt the same way. Michael Corleone, one of Romeo's men under his command wouldn't stop causally aiming his gun at a Elite from his hip.

"Too simple don't you think?" Romeo replied back.

The Elite just slightly shook his head.

Well at least UNSC HIGHCOM didn't put the Xenos in charge, because at that point Romeo wouldn't have even followed orders. No it was 'joint command' whatever the fuck that meant.

Something exploded near the dropship and the entire thing shook, tripping some soldiers and knocking over some Grunts. Another explosion and the ship shook worse than before.

"Opening up the hatch." The pilot yelled on the comms. Both sides of the interior lapsed away giving away the outside world. A Grunt grabbed the plasma turrets hanging outside the ship and started to open fire.

"I'm reading multiply neutral Xeno soldiers and fighters already engaging the enemy." The pilot said.

Romeo looked to his men and the Elite captain. "Alright ladies you remember the game rules, don't shoot the neutral Xenos and don't shoot our 'allies'." He said that looking to the Elite captain.

"We'll try our best." The Elite whispered.

From the outside Romeo could see some sort of small frigate and some

bombers engage a squid hostile destroyer. And below were the small lights of blue lasers and red and black lasers being exchanged from cover.

Hovering above the surface lower than the dropship they were in was the bright green of painted Covenant dropships and the tan/green of pelican, each one dropping off soldiers and vehicles.

Their ship got lower to the surface with each passing second and the once probably lush landscape was scared with debris and the black of artillery fire.

The ship finally hovered over the surface as the UNSC and Covenant soldiers ran towards the wreckage debris where some neutral Xenos were holding out.

"GO GO GO!" The Elite captain yelled and all the soldiers in the cargo hold, even the Grunt gunners jumped out of ship, a dozen at a time. When each individual soldier hit the ground, they were met with enemy fire which seemed to be coming from all directions.

Romeo hit the ground hard and looked around; there was no cover anywhere except for the wreckage which seemed to be the remains of a ship. It roofed over some areas so they were protected from artillery and fire, like a fort.

"Move to the wreckage, it's the only cover out here!" Romeo yelled to the troops, each turned towards the debris, firing back at the enemy, some dying and some getting injured and then carried by another soldier. The wreckage was a good three football fields away, and he could see some sort of AA batteries fire from the makeshift fort.

Romeo looked to his left and saw the Elite captain shot in his side on the ground, wounded but alive. Never leave a man behind even if he was a non-human.

Romeo sprinted and slide to the Elite's position; he didn't know exactly what to do so he grabbed the Elite's shoulder and tried to drag himâ€¦which didn't seem to work on a eight foot tall monster.

Romeo saw Rookie and yelled at him to get over here and help him. When he finally reached him, he grabbed the Elite's other shoulder and proceeded to help pull the Captain to safety.

Romeo saw a Elite minor a few yards away from them, firing back at the blazes of enemy weapons fire.

"Soldier get over here and help us!" Romeo yelled and the Elite ran to them and grabbed the Elite's leg, helping the two drag him.

Michael Corleone came out of nowhere and kept three yards ahead of them providing cover fire with his MA5B. Screams of other soldiers was heard louder than the bullets and lasers. Men ran past them and besides them either getting killed or still moving. A Jackal stood beside them shielding them from fire from his own personnel shield.

"Well this plan seems to be going well!" Romeo yelled to the Elite captain, who was still in a unconscious state.

Romeo could see the men from other battalions being annihilated and very few making it, the vehicles exploding and some providing cover fire.

Romeo and the squad made it to the wreckage, to what look liked a makeshift door and were meet not by UNSC or Covenant Cell soldiers but by soldiers in white armor and blue visors. There were four each with different colored markings and backpacks. All four of them guarded the entrance with two crouching and two standing at the edges of the door. All four of them fired back at the enemy as the enemy fired back at them

"Get inside now." One of them said in a deep gruffly voice, yelling over the gunfire. He had red markings which looked like blood.

The soldiers dragged the Elite into the building and pass the front door.

"Might want to clean up your house." Romeo said as he let go of the Elite once they were inside.

"Scorch close the door." A soldier said with orange markings on his armor. The two soldiers crouching got back into the wreckage and a soldier with grey and yellow markings smashed a button and the doors locked, leaving the bullets outside.

The soldier in orange markings looked to the UNSC and Covenant Cell soldiers, which now made up of Romeo, Rookie and Corleone, the Elite Captain, the other Elite and a Grunt.

"Busy day gentlemen?" The one they called Scorch said.

"Cut the chatter." The soldier in orange markings said. "Sev get back to the front and provide sniper support, Fixer get online with Alliance command tell them that first contact soldiers have entered our base but have not attacked us."

The orange one looked to the ODSs and the Xenos. "And you are?"

Romeo stood up. "Captain Romeo Agu, 19th ODS Division, UNSC, this is Lieutenant Rookie, and Corporal Corleone and whatever the fuck those are." Romeo said pointing at the Elites and the Grunt.

"Scorch get a medic." With that Scorch was gone and all was left was the orange squad leader. "You can call me Boss, captain of Delta squad, Alliance special forces. Now I have to ask what the Hell are your forces doing here?"

Romeo stood in front of him with his weapons still in his hands. "We are here as an advance force for the main wave, you guys had the only cover within damn light years."

"Then you better be planning to help us. Right now our orders are to hold off the Reapers until the Alliance can provide reinforcements; we still have dozens of civilians and injured soldiers who survived this crash. We read the reports we know what you and your people are

doing with 'Xeno' civilians." Boss held his rifle defensively and he made himself clear, we will complete our orders, with you or not.

Romeo looked back to his squad, a Xeno female medic who looked strangely human was helping the Elite , is you want to use the word 'helping' she was just standing there over the Elite obviously having no idea where to begin._ Don't act hostile, you're Human, you're a soldier. Under UNSC law you will not disobey a direct order from UNSC HIGHCOM._

"Sir." Corleone said, looking from Romeo to Boss. "I think it's agreed that we need to help them hold this position long enough for our reinforcement to arrive. We can use the shuttles to evacuate the military personnel and their civilians, we can also use it to evac our troops."

Artillery shells pounded the base. Boss motioned for Scorch. "Whatever you do you better not stop us from our mission. Scorch, join with Sev. Fixer once you finish your report get those fighters above to target those Reaper artillery positions."

"Sir?" Corleone said to Romeo.

"Fine we'll go with your plan Corleone, I get all the credit."

Aboard UNSC Infinity, classified location, 2186 Citadel Calendar, 1046

"After we finish up the Reapers on Illium we will meet you on this Citadel." Hood said.

"I think you're ignoring my question." Liara said a little impatient.

Both Lasky and Hood looked at each other while the Arbiter slightly shook his head, Roland looked uncomfortable.

"Is this part of the classified information?" Shepard asked.

"In a way." Lasky said, eyeing Roland. Then in that moment was a awkward silence, with the Council shifting and the UNSC standing there, until the Shepard spoke up.

"If it is you don't have to share it orâ€¦you can wait until the Council meeting on the Citadel."

"I think that would be wise." Lord Hood said then he looked to Roland. "Roland did she send you the coordinates?"

"Yeah and you won't believe where the Hell we are." Roland smiling and laughing, he pulled up a map of the galaxy and displayed two points, one where Illium was and one where the Citadel was.

Each one of their faces except for Lord Hood's was surprise to see where they were in the galaxy.

"Well what a surprise." The Arbiter said.

"And what region of the galaxy do you live in?" Shepard asked.

"Classified for now." Lasky said then all of a sudden turning to the Council. "I think that this meeting is adjourned until we meet at the Citadel and make this public. For now we will repeal this threat and help restore a civilian government."

The councilors looked to each other and all nodded; Tevos turned her attention to Lasky. "Alright Captain we shall not meet until then." Her voice held a hint of dissatisfaction. With that Tevos pressed an invisible button and all three of them disappeared.

Lasky turned his attention to Shepard and his squad. "Shepard if you and your friends can follow me."

****Aboard UNSC pelican, two kilometers from advance forces, 2557
Military Calendar 1049****

"Roger teams stand by." The captain yelled through the comms to the three Spartans IIs and the other Spartan IVs in the cargo room. Each one of them lock and loading their weapons. For some reason a Spartan IV brought a radio and started to play Creedence Clearwater's Fortunate Son

God knows how Fred knew that six hundred year old song and God knows why the Spartan IV was playing it.

The cargo hatch opened as the second wave of Pelicans and Phantoms flew over the rolling hills trying to avoid the Squid flak. Some were hit and destroyed. Pelicans carried Scorpions, hogs, Cobras and Wolverines while the heavy drop pods flew higher in the air carrying either firebases or Elephants.

"All teams this is General Urban Holland we have multiply UNSC personnel trapped within a crashed ship half a kilometer from the landing zone. We have confirmed reports of Human soldiers and civilians and Xeno soldiers and civilians at the crash site. Spartan team Alpha you are to evacuate those civilians at all costs, even if it's not Human."

"Even if it's not human? You mean we're helping those God damn Xenos?" A Spartan-IV said.

"Cut the chatter." Kelly yelled to the Spartan, after that he wisely shut up.

The pelican shook as more and more flak filled the air, Pelicans and Heavy drop pods started to make their descent.

"Stand by thirty seconds." The pilot said. The Spartans started to walk towards the opened cargo doors as the rolling hills beneath them as it filled up with the UNSC Marines and firebases dropped off by the Navy. Fred was the closest to the cargo door holding on with one hand while the other held a Spartan Laser.

The pelican descended lower and finally it was twenty feet above the ground still moving at the same speed.

"Roger, LZ reached." The pilot said. Fred motioned for the Spartans

to jump and two by two the Spartans exited the pelican as it still moved, finally in only seconds Fred and Kelly were left. Both looked at each other and jumped out of the pelican.

They hit the ground with a thud and took out their assault weapons. Fred could see the crashed Xeno ship as small arms fire shot out from the front.

"Fred can you get a look?" Kelly said. Fred nodded and used his helmet to advance his vision. He saw four soldiers in white armor and blue visors with different color markings holding off legions of squids by themselves. "Do you see our guys?"

"Uhâ€¦negative I only see squids and four Xeno soldiers."

"Ok, we need to get to the crashed ship; the other Spartans know where to go. Remember the civilians are our first priority. Wanna race me there?" Kelly said which got Fred's attention.

"Why not?" Fred said. With that they were both off with Kelly much farther ahead than Fred.

****Inside crashed ship, 2186 Citadel Calendar, 1050****

"I want a sniper maneuver now!" Boss yelled to Sev as he took a experimental sniper attachment and clicked it to his rifle. "Where the Hell are those first contact soldiers?" Boss ducked as Reaper fire flew over him. He shot back killing the Reaper who opened fire.

"They're fighting off the Reapers on the right side!" Fixer yelled. He pointed something out for Sev to shoot, he took the shot and a Reaper banshee's head was gone.

"How many bloody troopers does it take to hold off one side?"

"A couple companies apparently!" Scorch yelled as he threw a grenade. "When's the Alliance supposed to send evac or was it the UNSC that was supposed to!?"

"Just hold them off." The Boss replied. There seemed to be more and more Reapers heading towards the crash site. Two replacing each one they kill. Boss could see in the distance a Reaper destroyer battle a First contact ship in the air. If that first contact ship fails then that destroyer will be all over them.

Just another day for Delta squad.

Boss decided to contact Romeo through the comms. "Romeo how are your men holding up?"

"Good you sure you don't need reinforcementsâ€¦|..?" He asked with the sound of bullets in the background.

"I'm sure." With that Boss ended the conversation in mid-sentence, he looked to his squad and as usually they were holding out with no trouble.

"Oh no you don't." Sev said. Boss looked to what Sev was aiming his sniper at and saw a Husk split in two still moving, Sev took the shot

and the Reaper went down.

"Nice shot." Fixer said.

"That wasn't me."

Boss looked and saw two soldiers in green armor and orange visors coming in from the left firing off bullets into the Reaper crowds. The Reapers shot back but it either missed or hit the soldier's shields. The two soldiers moved into the Reaper crowd, cutting through until they reached Delta Squad, tearing Reapers apart with no trouble, stabbing banshees, ripping the weapons off cannibals.

"Well isn't this interesting?" Boss said.

****Unknown location, 1051****

"They are so old that even our masters have forgotten."

"Do they know of them?"

"No, nobody does but us and what we do know is very little."

"And what do we know of them?"

"They created us."

"That's not allâ€¦."

"They also created the most dangerous threat to this galaxy."

"Is it still alive?"

"I do not even knowâ€¦I hope 117 finished them off."

11. Internal Conflicts

****CHRIST CHRIST CHRIST, I'm sorry for not updating so long. But with the ending of some stuff, I'll have a lot more free time, and more time to create new chapters. Also in attempt to improve the story, I'm moving away from dialogue to...non-dialogue things. BUT DON'T WORRY. Dialogue will still be in here. Also grammar is a important thing to...still trying to improve that.****

****So..here, by the way if you want to suggest something for the story, PM me or write a review.****

****EVERYBODY GOT THE F***ING STAR WARS REPUBLIC COMMANDOS
REFERENCE, BUT NOT THE FING GOD FATHER REFERENCE?*****

****I am ashamed in all of you...****

****Aboard UNSC Infinity, classified location, 2557 Military calendar, 1050****

The Master Chief has been standing there for a good five minutes, just staring at her. Both Mark and Contradiction didn't say a word, and neither did Cortana. She has been staring back at the Chief.

"Johnâ€¦." She finally said. Her face was a mixture of relief, regret, sadness and happiness. "Iâ€¦." She started to choke, if she could form tears she would've but in technicalities, she was still non-human.

It was still silence. With no sound except the hum of the ship, Cortana was trembling, with the amount of emotions hitting her like a bullet.

"Master Chief?" The commander said, but the Master Chief ignored him and walked closer to Cortana, slowly, like a soldier, still staring at her. "Uhhâ€¦." The commander still said. "We replaced her interior core with a Forerunner databaseâ€¦, all her system are normalâ€¦." The commander stopped talking when he realized that nothing will get the Chief's attention.

"How?" The Chief plainly said.

The other A.I looked up. "We uhhâ€¦just told you." He said in a mixture of quietness and strangely some sadness. "She's wellâ€¦..part Forerunner?" The end of his sentence almost made it like he was questioning himself. "Right now we need toâ€¦.."

The Master Chief reached for the data chip connected to the table, slowly.

Cortana looked back up with a mixture of a smile and a frown, nobody stopped him, the commander tried to speak but he held his mouth and watched, his face held some suspense, not sure what to do, whether to stop this so nothing bad would happen or let the Chief be reunited with his lost friend.

The Master Chief unhooked the data chip and inserted into his mainframe at the back of his helmet.

For a split second his vision went blind, with the dull yet bright lights, and then everything went back to normal.

Nothing was processing in his mind right now. He was inâ€¦.utter shock. He watched her died, she'sâ€¦.dead.

Sheâ€¦.

"How are you?" The Master Chief simply said. What was probably hurting him worse was that he really didn't know what to say.

"I'mâ€¦fine." Cortana replied. It looked like she didn't know what to say either. She sounded like she was trying to hold back tears.

From then on it was just more silence, with the Captain looking back from them to Contradiction, while Contradiction also sat there cross legged with actual remorse on his face. The Engineer just floated typing on a datapad he held in his pink tentacle.

"I'm sorry." She finally said.

"No I amâ€¦.I made I promiseâ€¦I couldn't keep." His voice talking as if everything were normal, except for the pauses.

She made her face appear on his visor, and she made a small smile, half sad and half happy. "It wasn't your fault, I choose to save youâ€¦..I chooseâ€¦."

Commander Florence comm link started to blink blue. He moved his hand from his holstered pistol to his ear and started to listen and whatever he heard, he was not happy it. "Admiral sir" There was a moment of pause. "Yes Admiralâ€¦but sir right now?" Another pause as Cortana could barely hear the words of another voice. "Sir I understand but we just finished, he needs timeâ€¦.Iâ€¦.sir I know at least a day, a few hours at leastâ€¦SIR!" When Florence said that the voice on the other end grew slightly louder. "Yes sir I understand sir." With that Florence lifted his hand on his ear and mouthed the words 'Fuck you sir'.

He looked to the Master Chief and Cortana.

"Duty assignments?" She said with her voice returning back to what it was. She didn't know why is if she was returning to normal. Or what is now normal.

"Yeahâ€¦.you and the Master Chief are to report to Lord Hood on the bridge."

"Hmmmâ€¦we seem to never have a moment to ourselves do we?" Cortana said smiling; she saw on the Master Chief's face a little smirk.

"Yeah wellâ€¦it wasn't really part of the terms and conditions." Contradiction said, picking up on Cortana's voice.

"Iâ€¦." The Chief began to say.

"Come on it'll be fun." Cortana said, little more ready to leave this room and Contradiction.

"Rightâ€¦" Florence said. "I'm supposed to report to Captain Lasky nowâ€¦without you Contradictionâ€¦Admiral's orders were for you to stay here and analyze the new findings on Cortana's revivalâ€¦you can monitor me from communications."

With that (without a annoying remark from Contradiction) they were off to do whatever tasks they were assigned. In annoyance though Cortana was frustrated, both her and the Chief went through Hell and Lord Hood acts like nothing ever happened? Seriously? For now she would keep her mouth shut, yet something inside her wanted to talk back, to not take the order. To say what Florence said, 'fuck you sir', and just be with the Master Chief. Yet that was another problem, he doesn't mind, no that's not quite right, he does mind greatly. Yet he still follows orders, even after everything that's happen. Why? Do you ever think that to yourself John?

Why?

****Aboard UNSC Infinity, 2186 Citadel Calendar, 1100****

"Shepard, Liara, Tali." Lasky said to all three of them as the stood outside the hallway. Moments a go Lord Hood walked away saying he needed to be somewhere and the Arbiter left with two body guards that

stood outside the doors, menacing body guards to put at that. "You can leave if you wishâ€¦."

"I want to see my shuttle pilot, and I may want to put him back on my ship." Shepard said, with protection and friendship obviously put towards the shuttle pilot.

Lasky continued unshaken. "I was about to suggest that. Your pilot didn't take any major injuries, he's being taken care of in the Infinity medical area. If you want to see him, you can follow me and we'll see if we can transfer him to your ship."

With that, Lasky led them to the bullet train that'll present them to the medical area. All four of them were silent; Lasky noticed that Tali was trying to observe the ship, even though it was just empty, white, sterile hallways. So he tried to walk through more hallways, making sure to avoid weapons rooms, hangers, and data rooms.

He would have to keep an eye on her, she was the nosey type. Not being able to keep to herself. Funny it was just a defiance issue; Shepard promised he would keep his nose out of confidential issues. She was a little like Captain or now Commander Florence, defiant with that bit of hostility. She was also a littleâ€¦odd. Why does she keep a helmet on at all times? Sure her gear and armor was understandable, was it cultural? Something like the Islamic cultures? Or something more likeâ€¦biological? Sensitive to light, allergic to other species, weak immune system? Whatever the reason it wasâ€¦strange.

They reached the train station, as two other men, one of them a Marine, and the other a flight support crewmen stood there, both saluted. As nothing Lasky would be surprised by, they kept their eyes on the Xenos.

Funny yet disturbing, the flight support crewmen eyed Liara up and down, as if she were some girl in a bikini on the beach. It was more disturbing because Liara was â€¦Xeno. It wasn't like the racial discrimination in the 19th and 20th century or even like the idiotic Religious discrimination in the late 21st and early 22nd century. She was literally another species, another being. Still though she had a strange human look, her body, her face, and as Lasky hated to admit it, she was pretty good looking, she had a nice faceâ€¦a nice bodyâ€¦..what's with the scientist get up?

Lasky snapped out of it, the flight support crewman just continued to eye her, even from the slightly angry stare from Shepard.

Christ, don't tell me a human is going at it with a Xeno.

****Inside crashed ship, 2186 Citadel Calendar, 1050****

****Ten minutes ago****

"Who the bloody hell are you?" Boss yelled to the two obvious first-contact soldiers. The first thing that was noticeable on them wasâ€¦they were much larger than Delta Squad. Standing at around seven feet in green armor with orange visors, yet with their sizeâ€¦their armor seemed inefficient. No combat mold, no biometric scanners, and obvious weak points in the armorâ€¦yet judging from their combat stances they were highly trained, the way they held

their rifles, protected each other. It was like Delta Squad in a strange wayâ€¦just a little different.

"Lieutenant Fred-104, UNSC Special Forces Division, we're here to get you guys out of hereâ€¦." And explosion shook near them and the two soldiers raised their weapons, reacting much faster than Delta Squad, they both shoot down the thing that was firing at them. Instead of the blue lights of Eezo, it was the yellow light fire of lead bullets as the shells sprayed out of the rifle.

Delta Squad covered the right, shooting down enemies with speed and precision. The two other soldiers were good but not as good as them, almost nobody can, Delta Squad alone held this position against all odds. What can these first contact soldiers do? What made them so good? It was obvious that they were given the special armor and weapons much different and more advanced than a regular soldier. And something was changed about those special soldiers; it wasn't just mere coincidence that the soldiers that got the special job were an un-average height of seven feet. They were enhanced, either genetically or robotically, Hell perhaps both.

Funny Boss and the rest of Delta Squad were getting competitive.

"We held this position so far, all you guys did was just get here, and we did most of the work while you were 'reinforcing us'." Fixer said, his voice obviously propping them to a competition.

And Boss could see from their body movement that they were more concentrated on the mission, they didn't even acknowledge Fixer's comment. Both of them continued to shoot Reapers left and right.

Finally one of them spoke, a girl obviously. "Alright, you guys get inside and make sure you seal the area, we'll handle the front while the birds gets here and evac everyone."

"We got this; you make sure that those other First Contact soldiers have their area sealed off." Sev said but before the rest could argue; Boss motioned for the rest of them to the inside.

Those First Contact soldiers held a higher rank than any man in Delta Squad.

As the doors leading to the outside world closed behind them, Scorch faced boss and spoke up. "Sir are we gonna follow their orders?"

Boss looked to him and spoke in angry to make his point. "Our orders are to hold off the enemy until evac can come, yet they hold a higher rank than us so they can boss us around, but I'll tell you this I won't let them interfere with an original mandate."

Then Boss gave them their orders. Sev and Scorch were to reinforce the other First Contact soldier's positions and Fixer was to scout out the rest of the makeshift 'fort' and to make a report to Alliance command. Boss motioned on as the fort was still being hit. He started to run toward the interior of the fort and found a makeshift ladder leading into the war world. He climbed, slinging his experimental rifle that could form into a grenade launcher and a sniper rifle.

When he reached the top he found the Reaper ships in the air being held back by First Contact ships. The FC fleet was a mixture of heavy, bulky, grey/tan ships and purple and pink smooth, elegant ships. The bulky ships ranged in multiply sizes, each one with a name all beginning with UNSC and afterwards a difference in name from UNSC Caligula to UNSC Do a Barrel Role.

Boss turned his head to find dozens of transports, each the same color of the tan color; they were huge in size and carried four engines, one on each end. Boss sighed to himself and began to climb on to the roof to signal the ships.

These First Contact humans tried to take control vastly, the only thing that stopped them was that one young soldier and Boss's submission to the other First Contact soldiers.

Christ it was going to be a political Hell battle.

****Aboard UNSC Infinity bridge, 2557 Military Calendar, 1102****

Lord Hood looked upon the fleet as it continued to push back the Reaper fleet, UNSC ships knocking out the two kilometers squids from long distances with a mixture of MAC cannons and Archer pods. Debris mostly from the Reapers and some from Alliance, Illium Defense Force and UNSC ships rained the space above the green planet. It was estimated that the Reaper threat shall be totally defeated within the next five hours. It was just a matter of time to see if they'll retreat, admitting defeat and begin anew to combat them again. Most likely learning about their new enemies and what must be done to stop them orâ€|they'll continue to send in reinforcements until the UNSC and the Covenant Cell are forced to bring in more fleets to stop the annoying parasite and hunt them down to the origin of their spawning.

Standing beside him were Executive Officer Reed and Roland, waiting for his orders, orders that'll decide the 'formal' and 'public' meeting of a new Xeno race forâ€|technically the third time in UNSC history.

He sighed, thinking about that meeting before. He kept silent mostly to study them Shepard and his squad and theâ€|.Councilors. In reality they were nothing new, nothing Lord Hood had experienced before in the days when the UN Council was in control of Earth and her colonies. Yet he wondered the outcome of this meeting.

The people would know about the UNSC. It was impossible to keep this information secret, people on this planet will contact other people, hack other's messages and word will spread of a unknown military force coming through a God's key and annihilating their greatest threat. Xeno soldiers on the front lines will hear the stories and it'll give them hope, it's most likely that the people will love them even if they barely knew a thing about the UNSC.

So it was only a matter of the Council? Will the UNSC go for a grab to their throne? They fact is they already seem unfit for command, for example: judging on the evidence provided by Shepard. The Council ignored the threats, ignored the warnings, and even now. They won't admit defeat, they took in sly and in tongues trying to get their way, not taking a direct hit.

Even still what would happen if the UNSC does make a grab? It was obvious that the UNSC can overpower them all of them, yet how would the people react? Welcome them with open arms for a protector that can get the job done, just like when the UNSC overthrew the UN Council. Or will they be angry and fight. The Xeno soldiers fighting on two fronts, against the Squids and the UNSC and Covenant Cell, both much more powerful than the Xenos, both with seemingly endless armies.

Even with victory showing in every corner, Lord Hood still had doubt. Lasky had already promise that the Systems Alliance and the UNSC will stay sovereign. And with this , morally Lord Hood still had a problem with a takeover.

He remembered in his young days suggesting to his friends and superiors how a system of Government might work better. How to give less power to the politicians and more to the people, to stop political corruption and no eliminate personnel gains, a government that actually serves the people and gives them liberty and safety. In the end the people who did listen commented that it sounded like the politicians were slaves to the people. 'Maybe it would work that way,' Lord Hood would always respond.

And in later years when he took over the UN Council it wasn't exactly easy in a sense. He was a hypocrite, talking about freedom when in reality he even suppressed the people more and more, Basic rights were taking away to ensure their safety, sacrificing, keeping secrets that the people deserve to know. And in the end Humanity was safe, and overtime the UNSC changed from enforcing the laws of the UN Council to the colonies and ensuring liberty; to ensuring the survival of Humanity. It gave them a militaristic and brutal character and he can see it in the Xeno's faces, they distrust the UNSC and he couldn't blame him. The only thing saving them from complete hostilities was Captain Lasky; Lord Hood never regretted promoting him to Captain of Humanity's most powerful warship. At first Lord Hood was afraid, for Lasky being too soft and to kind, but his efforts in the Requiem events and battle of Earth proved that he was capable. And now his softness and kindness proved to be a great asset, his worth was now unquestionable.

Yet this wasn't the beginning of his kindness being first played. In the few days when the UNSC Infinity rested above the Homeworld, as obvious because of this, Lasky had a personal connection to Hood. And when he became Captain he made many suggestions on how to handle the Civilian populations, giving them more freedom and liberty, how to quell rebellions and not angering the populations. At first Hood thought that this was out of his duty to Humanity, his responsibilities to the UN. Overtime Lord Hood now knew it was out of his kindness.

So due to Lasky, Lord Hood had a morale issue, even if it was illogical, the UNSC's jurisdiction didn't apply to Xenos, and there was no way to know how to handle them.

For the moment Lord Hood would have to think, remember the Arbiter's words to play nice. Maybe it would be wise to learn more about them learn more about the UNSC, gain their trust. Lord Hood may also want to inform Lasky, see what he would think of all this, but Hood already knew his answer.

Now there was a problem on how to present themselves. Will they be treated like celebrities, paraded and cameras constantly in their faces or it'll be kept secret until the last second? In reality it was least important, Lord Hood was thinking on what kind of security to bring.

It was obvious that they needed to show their strength, whether going in to steal a throne or not. The UNSC will bring the UNSC Infinity as a guard and as a symbol. It was also obvious that they needed to bring their allies strength to show that the UNSC has backing. So Lord Hood would request the Covenant Super Carrier to be present during the public meeting.

Now ground security would have to be their best. A dispatch of Spartans including the Master Chief and the other Spartan-IIs, the Spartan-IIs would act as personnel security to Lord Hood himself. A company of ODSTs will also be present, yet instead of acting as personnel security, they shall be public guards, showing uniform and unity, they shall be led by Lord Hood's best men including Colonel Buck and Lieutenant Dubbo. A platoon of Marines will also be present (you could never be too cautious), yet there was a decision on who shall lead this platoon. Unfortunately Lord Hood was thinking of Commander Florence, in the end many people thought about him in a different way. 'Idiotic' 'Arrogant' etc, he remembered promoting Mark Florence and how many of the admirals disagreed. The UNSC at that time was desperate and Florence wasn't the only who was fast-tracked to a Captain, he was just the youngest. Florence technically did deserve execution, the only reason he wasn't because it lead to victory. He was in the category of being a threat to UNSC HIGHCOM, including those like Captain Ender Wiggen.

People judged, wanted him gone, with honorable, dishonorable discharge, execution, whatever. Hood liked to call these people the 'Reviewers' sometimes they made sense yet it dragged on and became annoying.

Now Florence was eligible to take actually command. Lord Hood sense that due to what Florence did, or what the 'voice' did. He was completely obedient, regretting what he did, wanting to redeem himself with the only seemingly possible was to obey orders and follow through. He still, personally at least, objected to these orders, yet he still followed through. In retrospect his spirit was broken, it was funny, most Italian sailors had this 'defiance' trait, and it was a trait descendent from the Sicilian Immigrates in the 20th century. Now it was gone, it wasn't eliminated in the best way. It should've been broken in basic training not in the death of his entire crew.

So Florence had potential except unlike Captain Lasky, he had less morale. He had more brutality, and in hopes, he can use it against the enemy.

Many things were left undone that needed to be finished, the Master Chief will be here any minute and Hood needed to explain to the Chief about his mission and make sure he's alright, all that with Cortana wouldn't be easy.

**Aboard UNSC Infinity medical area, 2186 Citadel Calendar,
1103**

Crowded.

As medics and doctors rushed around trying to fix up the soldiers, sailors, crewmen and pilots, stretchers and beds laid everywhere as men and women cried in sheets, on the floors; body bags were lined neatly with the impressions of dead soldiers.

Tali could see that they didn't know what to do with the wounds. It was dark energy wounds, eroding the bodies and burning at a insane amount of degrees. Yet they did what they could which seemed to be a lot even with no training in this. Dozens of medics held small black fire extinguishers? The medics sprayed a white substance into the soldier's wounds and in response, the wounded yelled and tried to move as other soldiers held them down. Their faces going red with pain as the medic continued.

Tali stopped for a moment, she discontinued the hacking into ship systems without the alarms going off, more out of respect in a strange way. It didn't feel right at least not here, with these soldiers dedicated to guarding what she's trying to steal, so she simply tapped a button quickly on her Omi-tool.

As Lasky led them forward, Tali recognized a familiar face. He stood near a bed talking to a wounded soldier; he wore the average grey Officer Uniform, long black hair, brown skin.

Captain Florence looked from the bed and walked over to the group, with no emotion, all business.

He approached the group and spoke with the same formality and no emotion, saluting. "Captain Lasky, I got word you would be here and you told me to meet you, sir."

Lasky nodded, saying at ease. Tali recognized the face of the soldier Florence was talking to. It was the injured Marine that was near death on the shuttle ride. As obvious he was looking much paler for the normal human mentality, he was on some sort of old looking plasma blood system and had a small heart monitor, beeping slowly every other second.

Lasky told the group, including Florence to follow him to the back of the large medical room. And as they were walking, past gravely wounded soldiers, body bags and rushing medics and doctors, was a small bed, obviously less attended to due to the lesser immediate care, laid Cortez looking around with a little confusion.

He seemed relieved to finally see some familiar faces, after a couple of hours being surrounded by strange men in strange uniform.

"Hey! Shepard, it's good to finally see you again." He said smiling. Both of them shook hands, Cortez a little weakly but that was understandable.

"Hey Cortez, how you holding up?" Shepard said, speaking half softly and the half tone of speaking to a close friend. "You got banged up pretty good back there, had me worried for a sec."

"Yeah" He did a sort of laugh. "I'm fine, hey thanks man for getting me out of that wreck, I owe you one."

Shepard did a half pause and looked to Commander Florence who just stood there; ready to take orders from either Captain Lasky or somebody else with higher authority. "It wasn't me who saved you—it was Commander Florence here, he went back to get you, pulled you out, got you to the transport."

Cortez looked from Shepard to Florence. Unlike before in the few times Tali had seen Commander Florence; his face no emotion unlike before which held surprise, contempt, suspiciousness or anger. It was just plain, void of anything at all, nothing in his eyes or mouth, no evidence of anything. It sort of startled Cortez for a split second but he returned back to normal. "Well—I'm going to have to say thank you Commander Florence, if it weren't for you I'd be burning in a ship fire."

At that moment a small smile and friendliness came back to Florence's face, but it was only for the time he spoke and then it returned back to the emotionless void. "Hey don't mention it; just a little charity came in to my little heart."

Shepard looked back from Florence to Cortez. "Well can you still fly up in the air or should we leave you here?"

Cortez smiled. "Are you kidding me? I was afraid for a moment in the beginning if this would put me on the ground. Trust me I want to get back to the field badly."

Shepard smiled and nodded, happy to see his crew member feeling better and happy for his eagerness to get back into the fight.

Lasky looked from the two of them and looked to Florence. "Commander, can you lead them to docking bay 14-9, they want to get back to their ship and won't be seen until the Citadel meeting." Florence looked a little confused at the word, 'Citadel. "Unfortunately Lord Hood wants to see me on the bridge, afterwards I want you to head to the bridge yourself, we need to talk alright?" Lasky's voice still held that happy, high tone, enthusiastic voice unlike Commander Florence, who simply nodded and saluted the Captain.

Florence began to lead the four of them, Cortez walking with a sort of futuristic cane, complaining about the white foam the medics used for his wounds and how much pain it caused him beyond his already set injuries.

"Well if the already distinguished guess will follow me?" He said in his once normal sarcastic tone, yet his face still held no emotion.

****Aboard UNSC Infinity docking bay 14-9, 2557 Military Calendar, 1110****

Florence and the four of them finally reached the docking bay, the ride over was more of a conversation between the four of them while Florence kept quiet, looking over his data pad, pretending to review orders and strategic analysis while in reality he was listening in.

Besides just being squad mates, they seemed close, very close. Personal friends as if they been through Hell in back. Jokes, stories

and so on. In some parts of the conversation it was a bit disturbing. The battering between Liara and Shepard seemed to hint at something more. The thought of it made Florence vomit a little inside his mouth.

A Xeno and a Human? Yeah sure she looked Human enough but still. Christ, let's just hope one day a fucking hybrid doesn't come along.

Anyways with those disturbing thoughts in his mind and the continuing conversation of the four, they finally reached the docking bay.

The bay was filled with the engines noises and the mass of Heavy Lift Pods and Albatross heavy transports. Marines and Army personnel rushed to their assigned transports, not even taking a second to notice the two Xenos standing in the bay. Flight Support Crewmen and Infinity Support Teams rushed to fill the transports with supplies and loaded up vehicles, from Cobra tanks to Falcon transports.

Nobody took a second to notice them all and even after all this, a small landing pad elevated, made originally for Pelican transports, stood empty with two Infinity Support Crewmen standing around, and obviously ordered by Captain Lasky to wait for the Xeno transport.

And what came through the blue shields of the docking bay was the same small blue transport Florence had saw get destroyed in the Xeno city.

It landed on the small docking pad, with a Wolverine aiming at it causally at the back of the hanger and a turret installed above readying in case the shuttle tried to do something. Even with Lasky's explanation and orders, the two Support Crewmen aimed their M6 pistols at the shuttle, standing at the entrance to the cargo bay as if setting up for an ambush.

The five of them walked up the large ramp to the transport and meet the two Crewmen at the cargo door.

When the doors opened, two people stepped out. Both of them were Human, one was buff, heavy built as he causally cared a rifle that sort of reminded Florence of a strange mixture of a Battle Rifle and a MA5B. The other one was female, she was shorter than the other soldier, with famine curves and so on, and she walked out with a little confidence, though noticing the two crewmen aiming their weapons at them. She aimed a weapon back and it only tensed up the situation more, until Shepard intervened.

"Easy Ashley, stand down, they're only being cautious." With a hesitant moment she aimed her weapon down. Disliking this order.

Both of them wore armor and helmets that almost matched Shepard's armor besides obvious different chest plating's and other anomalies. Ashley wore bright blue armor while the other wore dark grey.

The two Support crewmen decided to holster their pistols and pretty much stood there, being useless.

"Vega, Williams." Shepard said nodded to both of them. "Glad to see you again."

"Hey commander." The soldier whom they call Vega said, he had sort of a Hispanic accent and his voice made it sound like he was in his mid-twenties. "Good to see you again, damn when we were heading inside the ship we were...damn this is a big ship."

"Yeah tell me about it, and unfortunately we can't stick around."

"Why not?"

Commander Florence stepped forward, for a second Ashley flinched but she covered it up pretty good, she was studying him like he was some kind of threat, it was obvious that she was the cautious type, slow to trust others and so on. It could've been from some experience or some sort of indoctrination whether from training or somewhere else. "Gentlemen; Commander Mark Florence, United Nations Space Command, UNSC Infinity, Battle Group Dakota."

"Right nowâ€¦" Florence continued. "We are already planned a meeting with the Council aboardâ€¦the Citadel, so there would be really no point in staying since we'll see each other again, and we also can't risk the leak of classified information."

Williams looked to Shepard, who simply nodded. Both Ashley and Vega stepped aboard the ship, Shepard helped Cortez on while Liara and Tali also boarded.

Florence stepped closer to the shuttle, his voice raising a little to combat the sound of the engine. "Heyâ€¦one last thingâ€¦." His voice lost that formal tone that now seemed to plague him whenever he spoke. "I'm sorry if Iâ€¦we offended you, Taliâ€¦Liara aboutâ€¦theâ€¦distrustfulness, you have to understandâ€¦..every other Xenoâ€¦different species we meet have tried to wipe out Humanity. So you have to understand that we were only being cautious. Right now though...I think I can trust you a little more, stop treating you like hostiles and more likeâ€¦people."

Before anything else could be said, the shuttle doors closed and the transport lifted. It backed out of the hanger and into the blackness of space, making a ninety degree turn and flying off.

As it left, sirens started blare in the hanger. Warning; Flight and Support crews that a new batch of Heavy transports were about to take off and another set will land soon, unloading wounded soldiers, dead bodies and maybe Human and Xenoâ€¦..civilians.

He turned around and started heading towards the exit. Even though he made his apologies for his behavior towards themâ€¦and everybody else's, he still felt that heavy distrust and resentment towards the Xenos like any other soldier in the UNSC. It was impossible to shake off, even against his morale. The only man who would probably being having a easy time with this would probably be Lasky.

Speaking Lasky, Florence needed to head to the bridge to speak with him.

Aboard UNSC 13**th**** Disciple, 2557 Military Calendar,

1610**

Five hours later

"Ok launch MAC One at the nearest hostile, redirect Red Squadron to coordinates 0-5-1-0-0-0-3-1, and protect the Long Swords from enemy fighters."

"Aye, aye Captain!" His First Officer yelled.

The 13th Disciple had been redirected with a dozen other vessels including a few Covenant Cell ships to wipe out the remaining Squid forces and liberate the Xeno world. Unfortunately it proved to be quite a challenge as the Squid ships have a tendency of getting into knife fights and attach to cruisers and rip them to shreds.

So the battle has been a constant maneuver of changing positions and resetting into position for the MAC rounds. Yet it wasn't the most unyielding challenge. Fighter and Long Sword bombers proved to be a great asset in this situation, as the Xeno ships are a lot more maneuverable and faster than UN ships.

So it was better for the larger ships, Marathon cruisers and Destroyers to condone fast attack strikes, using a strategy very similar to the Keyes maneuver, letting the missiles follow the ships and guiding them to the Xeno target. The other UN and Covenant distracted the Squids, while the Squid ships were distracted, Longswords, and Phantom heavy loaded bombers ripped the Squids from the inside out.

The Long Sword and Fighter group: Red squadron flew off, flying near the portside of the 13th Disciple, using the ship as cover, charging towards the two kilometer capital ship right in front of them, trying to get a grab on of the 13th Disciple.

As the Squid seemingly was about to clock the UNSC 13th Disciple, a UNSC Marathon Class cruiser, UNSC '666 Stair To Heaven', zipped by, knocking a dozen Archer pods into the side of the ship, drawing the ship's attention. The fighter had a clear opening as the 13th Disciple blasted any Xeno fighters coming near and trying to hold off other Squid ships.

"Rodger this is Commander Skywalker we are clear for payload drop." A communicator in Red Squad yelled.

"Rodger that Commander you have the green lights." Captain Wiggen replied.

The Disciple moved away from the Xeno ship as it proceeded to combat more enemies. A light as bright as a star erupted from the top of the Xeno Capital ship, as UN fighters quickly moved out of the way of its blast radius, dozens of more of these lights plumed. And when the lights succeed, all that was left was the ashes of a giant squid.

Other Squid ships suffered the same fate, or were arrested and shut down after the bombardment of MAC rounds, Archer pods, Rapier and Fusion missiles.

The remaining of the once unending squid army started to retreat

towards somethingâ€¦|

"Gentlemen follow those ships, I want to see where they're going, knock out as many as you want but keep some alive." Wiggen said throughout the fleet comms.

The ship's engines made the entire hull rumble as it followed the Xeno ships, as obvious the squid ships were getting farther away. Until a UN frigate, UNSC 'Love is Prejudice' flew by, ripping off a few legs of a smaller Squid ship.

"That one right there, the limping one, tag that as B-1 and make sure it's not destroyed!" Wiggen yelled to the fleet.

Now the ships picked off the rest, leaving some alone and even sending a few fighter squadrons to knock up B-1 just for the realism.

Ender could see the destination the survivors were heading to. It was the God's Key and it was heavily defended by UNSC and Covenant Cell ships.

The last of the Squids were destroyed in direct blasts of slug and plasma rounds.

Now the battle, lasting for seven hours, has finally been won but something still bothered Ender's mind. Was the God's Key a three-way teleporter? If the Reapers entered the God's Key then they would've meet even more UNSC ships and a Halo Ring, but how the Hell did that one Xeno ship come through? Or how did others leave and go to their correct destination?

Ender couldn't be the only one thinking this orâ€¦|maybe he wasâ€¦|since most would be concentrating at the situation at hand and not even give second thought to a system of particular travel.

For now he would file these thoughts he had to Lord Hood or the Infinity's Captain, Thomas Lasky. A hypothesis started to form in Ender's head.

What if it had to do with the Forerunners and Humanity's inheritance? Could it be that something maybe affecting the God's keys because of some of the Forerunner designs imprinted on some of the ships? It somehow opened a new route? And it could also be possible that ships even with no Forerunner technology could go through the other God's Key with the Halo Ring beside it. So then how did it know to send UNSC and Covenant Cell ships back?

A possible conclusion came over Ender's mind; even as impossible as it was, it is the most likely.

He immediately created a line to Lord Hood.

12. Opening the House

FINISHED ONE BCHESâ€¦|.anywaysâ€¦|sorry it took so long to update. I'll try and not let it happen again. Anyways some people are complaining about the references not sure what they're talking aboutâ€¦|I've only made like one or twoâ€¦|I'm kidding fine, after this

chapter I'll try to make them less frequent but that doesn't mean they'll be non-existent**

Also I would really like to thank my new Beta: Kira Kyuu

**Also these
people:**

Earthpatriot117

Muredin

MECHANICALCHEESE

Tlegrys

Zomvee

I WILL HAVE YOUR HEAD (Except for Overlord of the Afterlife, at least he apologized)

Aboard SSV **_Normandy**_, 2186 Citadel Calendar,
1612**

Shepard and the rest of his crew gathered in the Control Room of the CIC. Each one looking to the Commander as he entered the room from his debriefing with Admiral Hackett.

It was basically a report of everything Shepard has learned and what he accomplished with the First Contact people.

Now, it was time to brief the crew on everything and maybe set some future plans in motion and reconstruct some old ones.

Shepard stood at the Holo-table with Traynor and Liara at his side, and with that the briefing began.

In itself, it was basically Shepard reciting the events that receded within the span of the few hours above and on Illium's surface, from the crash of the UNSC _Legend_ _After_ to the meeting aboard the UNSC _Infinity_.

What bugged some of the crew members (and Shepard couldn't blame them) was how everything really happened.

"So wait, how exactly did the _Legend_ _After_ crash on Illium's surface?" Garrus asked with his usually tone, with the same enthusiasm and a little hostility.

"Unknown, they never really said nor would they want to. In the few hours we got to know them, they seemed like the openly quiet type. Every time when we tried to dig even a slight inch beneath the surface, we were hit with barrages of 'classifications' and hostilities," Shepard said still looking at a model of the _Infinity_ with the little information gathered on it.

Tali was also looking at it but with more intensity, using her Omi-tool to input more data that she collected.

"Why though?" Traynor asked, "You would think that they would try a

more subtle approach to avoid leaking classified information" she said obviously trailing off for one of the three to pick up.

"They said multiple times that they distrust Xenos due to one bad encounter. Ever since then I guess, they still haven't got used to the fact that not every other species wants to kill them," Liara explained, shrugging and tilting her head.

"Then what about those other ships?"

The room was silent for a second before Liara spoke again, with rehearsal in her tone.

"They're now friends."

With that more silence filled the room as they processed the information

So they don't trust other Xenos? Yet they're willing to trust Xenos that tried to harm them.

"What about the scientific theory on the 'other Humans?" Garrus said with a little sarcasm in his voice.

Liara sighed, annoyed with her lack of information on the situation. "Well, my theory is" which, by the way, isn't much "is that the Protheans had something to do with this. Maybe implanting some different kind of technology scheme that doesn't involve dark energy to see which ones could fight off the Reapers better." She did sort of a sad laugh at the end.

"But" She continued, "Dozens of times, they mentioned a race called the 'Forerunners', speaking in a similar fashion as we do the Protheans."

"So do you think these Forerunners are the Protheans?" Garrus said making a motion with his hand.

"That I don't know. Their technology is so different. Ships this massive with little to no trace of dark energy," She hesitated "I don't think it's even something the Protheans could pull off."

"There's also something I did sort of notice." Tali said, interrupting the entire exchange.

Everybody turned her, waiting as if she had the entire truth.

"While we were aboard I did some scanning" Tali said implying her embarrassment and looking to Shepard. Shepard had given his word to Lasky to cease and stop information stripping and hacking which the Qurian failed to do. "There was something odd with the ship. It took some analysis but it finally made sense."

She pulled something onto Holo-table from her Omi-tool, the images looked like a bunch of numbers and lines to Shepard and most likely to the rest of the crew.

"What exactly are we looking at, Tali?" Shepard asked, still trying to figure out the picture.

"Well, these are circuit logic entries and architectural designs, some energy inputs, and so on. Look at this." She zoomed in on her Omi-tool to a set of two parallel lines, one pair going vertical and one going horizontal. Each with some complicated looking numbers standing near each line. "These are circuit logic entries to the _Infinity_—they're completely different."

"This is inefficient," EDI finally said after staying silent for the conversation, referring to the circuit logic. "One is highly underpowered and is only able to maintain a few operations at once, while the other seems—." Her face lit up with surprise, "More advanced than the Protheans, it could be able to withstand a dozen operations and provide unlimited flows of energy."

"Exactly!" Tali exclaimed excitedly, as if she were preparing for a big show. "Ohhhhh, but that's not even the best part! Oh no!" She pulled out of the image and moved it to a simple diagram of the _Infinity_'s engines. "Look at this! The engines are a different design. Far more advanced than anything we ever seen, and uses huge amounts of power even for a ship this size, it looks like the engines have just been stabled on—."

"So this is the Forerunner." Shepard said. "That A.I—"

"A.I?" Ashley said.

"—aboard the _Infinity_." Shepard continued, minding Ashley. "—said that technology on the Catalyst is similar to Forerunner technology—"

"But that doesn't make any sense! The Catalyst obviously had Prothean designs, how could we not see a different architect and circuit logic design especially with all our analysis and reconstruction?"

Shepard was silent before speaking. "EDI—gather everything we have on the Catalyst and cross-analyze it with what we have on the _Infinity_—I think for now we should focus on the present. The UNSC will be meeting with the Council in a day. We should head back to the Citadel and help prepare for their arrival."

Liara still stared at the engine designed as she pulled out a schematic of the Catalyst, biting her lip, looking from image to image, she finally and quietly said: "Alright."

"So—right now we're playing intergalactic royal guard to another Human race that can probably destroy us all on a whim, a mystery race that may have the key to winning the war, and—.No,that's about it. So,this is just another average day, isn't it_**?*_*_" Garrus said.

"It would seem so. Joker set coordinates for the Citadel—" He stopped for a second and looked to his crew. "—Anyways—any other word on the fronts?"

Surface of Menae, 2186 Citadel Calendar, 1613

General Corinthus took cover as a Reaper bomber squadron made another fast-attack run, followed by Turian interceptors.

Other men began to fire, as they kept their heads down in the trench. In the distance, Corinthus could see a couple of Krogan platoons fighting off hundreds of Reapers. Above, a Turian Dreadnaught provided long range support for civilian ships trying to make it to the Relay, and from there to the Citadel.

The trenches were formed similar to the ones in the Human World War, two hundred years ago. Injured sat on the floor while medics attended them, and as other soldiers ran by to do their assigned tasks.

One of the injured was looking over his Omi-tool, and abruptly, smacked the shoulder of another soldier and forced him to look. Surprise took over his face as he motioned for more to look. By the end of two minutes, a dozen soldiers looked at what the Omi-tool was displaying.

Corinthus looked to the field for a second, seeing that the situation was clear for the moment; he crawled and maneuvered over to the group. The soldiers-noticing him- stood and saluted as the one with the Omi-tool open remained sitting.

"Gentlemen, what's going on here?"

The soldier with the Omi-tool simply sent him a file. Corinthus opened it and saw the news report:

"_In recent war events: Systems Alliance and Illium Security forces have completely rid the planet of all Reaper forces. Dozens of reports confirm that they had help from _an_ unknown Xeno military force. This Xeno force came through the Mass Relay that connected Illium to the rest of the galaxy. The military force immediately attacked all Reaper forces with ships and firepower that has never been seen before, quoted from many reports from Alliance troops. This unknown Xeno military force is called the 'United Nations Space Command'. Unfortunately_,_ the Alliance New Network could not gather any more information due to the classified nature of the situation. We'll try to cover more of the situation in the following weeks."_

After the text, the rest of the screen was filled with pictures, some better than others. It was either a blurry image of soldiers fully dressed to the point where you could barely see their skin or bulky ships in the distance, taken from an Alliance ship. Yet there were two that piqued Corinthus' interest: one was of a pink ship, floating near the Mass Relay. It was much larger as it almost covered the Mass Relay, yet Corinthus couldn't quite see any more details. The other picture was of a Xeno soldier - also just as blurry - as he slung some sort of rifle from his side_**.**_ What was most interesting was that his skin wasâ€pale, very Humanlike, as was his body and anatomy.

"The Spirits have blessed us, sir. With some new ass kicking friends, we can win this for sure."

Judging from the energy of the group, they were excited, happy and newly moralized by this turn of events. And why shouldn't they be? Hell, even Corinthus was a little energized, a new friendly species that has enough fire power to remove the Reapers from a planet in five hours?

Something that can finally defeat the Reapers, once and for all.

Aboard SSV Normandy, briefing room, 2186 Citadel Calendar, 1614

"Analysis of communication reveals that the story of the UNSC is spreading, fast, being passed from Omi-tool to Omi-tool_" Traynor said, in the plain robotic voice.

"So, I'm guessing this is giving a boost helping them try to drive the Reapers back?" Shepard said, wondering more about the militaristic situation.

"Yes, tactical movement shows that ever since the story spread, Admirals, Commanders, Generals, so on, are making bolder moves."

"In other frontline news," Traynor continued, "A Reaper advance force has begun to invade the Qurian/Geth sector, so far they're able to hold them off_ The Turians and Krogans are still being driven back but much slower_ I haven't heard much from the Salarins " last I heard a few Reaper scouts skimmed their borders, but that's it. Asari are holding the Reapers well off in their outer colony worlds.and the Resistance on Earth is still on the move, a few of their bases have been hit recently, but there seems to be no long term damage."

Shepard nodded, and looked to his crew. "And what about Cerberus?"

"Cerberus has been strangely quiet, at least ever since the UNSC came through the Mass Relay."

"So_ I'm going to assume they heard about all that happened, before the news reports came out at least?"

"No doubt."

Shepard stood silent for a moment.

Cerberus not acting on this? What the Hell are they planning? Well, it could only mean a few possibilitiesno even then._

He couldn't think of a solution nor could the rest of his crew, judging by their faces. "I think the only thing we can do at the moment is to head back to the Citadel and prepare. Traynor, for now try to monitor radio activityAny questions, objections?" Shepard said as he once again looked to crew.

Silence.

"Alright_ Joker, get us to the Citadel_. The rest of you are dismissed."

The crew left one by one, as the images and reports still stood on the Holo-table. Liara still stood there, looking from report to image to another report, as she had a slight look of tiredness on her eyes and on her face.

Shepard did a double take, as he walked to the right side of her, and

stood with her watching the reports.

"You alright?" he asked calmly.

She did a little laugh as she crossed her arms over her chest, and looked at him. "You can have so many times where the world is pulled from your feetâ€|" She trailed off with sadness and distraught.

"How so?"

"The Forerunners, I mean look at thisâ€|" as she motioned to the Holo-table. "â€|for, ha, years I've been studying the Protheans, their history, their culture, their technology, and nowâ€|." She stopped herself, as she rephrased her next words. "â€|The Protheans gave us everything, they expanded across the galaxy. Nowâ€|these Forerunners may have proven that it was lie. The Forerunners proved that the Protheans are not nearly as advanced, that they may have not spread across the galaxy.

"Butâ€|" she continued, as she looked back to Shepard_**,**_ "â€|the Forerunners are obviously advanced like I said, from the evidenceâ€|they maybe more advanced than the Reapers, so, does this meanâ€|the cycle doesn't exist? Think about it, at some point during the cycle the Reapers had to encounter these Forerunners, so what happened? Why are the Reapers here now? The way the UNSC spoke about the Forerunners; they sounded like they died a long time agoâ€|"

Shepard did take her seriously, and did think about it. "I'm going to be honest, I didn't study Protheans as long as you did, and I sort ofâ€|.well I was going to say 'fell asleep during the classes' but in reality I cut classes a lotâ€|.Anywayâ€|.I think you shouldn't think about this too much. We barely know anything about this as it is, Hell for what we might know, there might beâ€|.more ancient aliens or people born from dragonsâ€|" He trailed off as he sounded more and more like an idiot.

She smiled a little at this. "I know. I guess I'm more scared of the unknownâ€|or what weâ€|might find. You're right, thoughâ€|I am thinking too much, making out possibilities with darkness. It's just been a long day." She laid her head on his shoulder, taking a breath, staring at the holo-table.

They both stayed like that for a while, just staring at the holo-table. As it flickered a mixture of blue and light red the laminated on them.

"Come onâ€|Unfortunately_**,**_ we have work to do," Shepard finally said.

Aboard UNSC **_Infinity**_**, briefing room ,2557 Military Calendar, 1615**

Lord Hood told the rest of them to wait outside while he tried to get a communications line.

"Roland, did you get it to work?" Hood said, still waiting for the holo-display to start up.

"Yes_**,**_ sirâ€|I think so, but the connection maybe a little

choppy."

"That's fine."

With that Roland tapped something on an unseen, imaginary computer, and the holograms of seven Admirals, Generals and Commanders displayed.

One was a General with short cut hair, and a stout face. It showed a baroque attitude, and the knowledge of years of experience. He was medium built with a grey uniform with the symbol of the UN Army, displayed over his heart with the nametag: General of the Army Urban Holland.

The other figure standing near him and Roland had the prestigious uniform of the UNSC Marine Corps. He also held the face of years of experience, with a mixture of a more outgoing personality, friendly, and responsive. He had a heavier build hiding beneath a green uniform with the tag: General Nicolas Strauss.

Across them was a man in his mid-forties with a face that held fear, anger, and the dangerous addition of vanity. He had the uniform of the UNSC Navy, as the uniform held his badges of honor during his effort in the final stages of the Great War. He was Fleet Admiral Jay Harper, commander of the forward battle groups and replacement head of the UNSCDF incase anything happens to Lord Hood.

The other two wore dark grey military uniforms_**. **_ One had the darker skin of a Middle Eastern persona; he was Major General Issaher Bar-Lev, commander of the military forces within the Inner Colonies_**. **_The other had a lighter uniform with the complexion of a Asian; he was decently build, and he was the youngest (out of the Generals and Admirals) being 41 years old-with the obvious disadvantage of less experience; his name was Brigadier General Jason Shimazu, head of the military forces in the Outer Colonies.

In replacement of the head of ONI, Admiral Serin Osman, was a younger man with an ONI grey uniform. He was only in his twenties, but seemed more experienced than some of the admirals. He had brown hair and white skin. He was First Lieutenant Cole Phelps, secondary commander of the Office of Naval Intelligence Military Investigation (ONIMI).

And finally the other youngest, in a UN Navy grey Captain's uniform. With a light build, and a face, purposely kept. Yet Lord Hood knew that under that face held tactical and strategic brilliance. Captain Andrew Wiggen, head Commander of the UNSC 13th Disciple and head commander of Companies Zulu and Beta within Battle group Dakota.

Each one saluted as Holland yelled: "Admiral on the deck!"

"Gentlemen, at ease." Lord Hood said, nodding to all of them. "You have all received the reports of the following events, and now we are heading to the meeting at thisâ€|.Citadel."

"Now..." he continued, "We are here to obviously discuss future events and the present. I brought forward my plans to all of you. But I do understand that your distrust toward Commander Florence is

obvious, so to satisfy you all, I'm replacing him as head of the Marine platoon with Colonel Stacker."

"Admiralâ€|" Strauss said in a heavy German accent, "â€|I suggest that you bring a _few_ Marine platoons. From your reportsâ€|yes, they seem quite friendly and less technologically advanced, yet we must insure security. If they turn on us, then we must have more time so the _Infinity_ can provide support and in hopes get you all out of there."

Lord Hood nodded in agreement. "General, I think you might be rightâ€|yet with an infantry group this large, we have to have a second in commandâ€|"

"Whyâ€|" Admiral Harper began in a New Yorker accent. "â€|do you want to give Commander Florence a chanceâ€|.?" Most of them could tell that Hood still wanted to give Commander Florence a chance.

"Becauseâ€|." Phelps interrupted, "â€|The physiological report I indexed on the after effect of the incident, indicates that Commander Florence has changed into a completely loyal and obedient soldier. And I understand that this may not be the best situation to put him under the test, but who else do we have with intelligence like him? Because if we put somebody slightly less clever, then the whole situation might be a disaster."

Most of them looked displeased with this while Captain Wigen stood silent, still void. "Admiralâ€|" he began, "â€|I think the best alternative would be, to place a Spartan-IV group instead of the Marine platoons and place Commander Palmer as secondary commander. And put Commander Florence with Commander Reed in temporary command of the _Infinity_â€|"

Admiral Harper was about to say something.

"Admiral!" Andrew nearly yelled, "I understand this. But Mark Florence is a 'Commander' in the Navy, and I do agree with Detective Phelps, he is now a soldier, ready to serve. At this moment with another Commander and a security A.I plus the _Infinity's_ A.I. we don't even have to put him in a position of power."

He was stepping outside his boundaries, he was speaking out towards an Admiral, and he was only here because he had a priority to report.

Admiral Harper and General Holland looked to each other, then to Lord Hood. "Sir, whatever decision you make will be up to you, but we just want what's best."

"I will seed your advice, admiral," Lord Hood said, "For now I think we have many other important matters to discuss. Admiral Harper, what are your reports on Requiem?"

Admiral Harper pulled something onto the main Holo-display, a strategic map of all of Requiem, including the positions of Storm Covenant, Prometheans_**,*_ and UNSC battle groups. "Right now Admiral, we are making fine progress_** â€" *_unfortunately with a heavy casualty rate, as the Prometheans fight like Hell for every inch. We are quarantining Forerunner technology and are taking them

to safe areas for study. And we are taking extreme precautions so there won't be an incident like earlier today." He paused for a moment as he studied the map. "There is something strange though Admiralâ€¦."

He zoomed in on a small area of the map, a place that was deep in Promethean territory, surrounded by mountains. "A few hours ago something popped up the scanner that alarmedâ€¦.everybodyâ€¦."

A few triangles appeared on the map, with small insignias. "The A.I identified them as UNSC F.F tagsâ€¦dating back to 2552â€¦during the Great War."

Lord Hood nodded.

Strange, dating back to the Great War? How would they get ahold of this? Unless if it was some veteran that served with the UNSC back then, and his unit was captured and token behind enemy lines, but his F.F tag would've changed.

"If you can, Admiral, try to get a better reading on these tags, and send a unit to investigate. I understand that your forces are spread thin for the moment, but this matter may be important, in factâ€¦it actually may breach Cole Protocol."

The end of his sentence basically translated to: "Priority one is to investigate the location of the F.F tags at once."

"Sir, yes sir!"

Lord Hood looked to General Holland, who was present in the current theater on Illium. Lord Hood believed he is onboard the UNSC Salvation. "General Holland, can you get me a current update on the new front?"

He nodded as the map of Requiem was replaced to a map of the current planet. "From all reports, the Reapers have been completely removed from the planet. As you ordered, we let the Xenos go in peace, _including_ the local Human population." He said the last part with vital disagreement towards Lord Hood's decision. "Our troops and their troops are letting each other at peace. But from time to time we get reports of our troops being harassed byâ€¦news reporters. We gave our men orders to arrest these people on the spot to ensure Cole and JAG Protocol is fully enforced."

Hood again nodded, this time in approval. He turned to Detective Phelps. "And the investigation of ONI?" Lord Hood has assigned the UNSC Department of Internal affairs as lead of the investigation of ONI. And he reorganized the ONIMI so that they would only be loyal to Lord Hood and the UNSC board.

"Unfortunately Admiral Osman is playingâ€¦.political. If I would suggest that we bring ONI's investigation public, so that more pressure would be put on Osman and ONI."

"Denied_**.**_ You and I both know the JAG protocols. What we need to do is cut off Osman from any sort of power, which even includes her own department."

Cole stood there thinking for a moment. "The only way, sir, is to

either split Osman's department and merge it with someone else's or remove her from office."

"And replace her with who?" Lord Hood wanted to make sure that Osman won't do anything. At this moment, Hood wasn't sure whether to temporarily remove her or permanently. Yet the question was: who would replace her? As much as Lord Hood distrusted anybody who was a figure of ONI, they were intelligent, yet cold and calculating. As anybody should be, especially leading a department like ONI.

"Sir?" Cole asked, a little confused.

"I'll inform your department leaders that they have authority to 'temporarily' remove Osman from office, if they choose so," Hood said, trying to cover up his last question.

"Captain Wiggenâ€|" Lord Hood stated, looking to him_**,**_ "â€|I understand you have something very important you wanted to sayâ€|.Aâ€|.theory about the God's Key jump system?"

"More or less, sir_**,**_ I would actually say it's a mereâ€|suspicion, at least to a mind outside mine. Yet I felt that my 'suspicions' at least deserved to be heard."

Hood nodded, and motioned for him continued. "Some of you may have wondered what the purpose of the God's Key is, like I have. Yet what I reviewed was that the God's Key was some sort ofâ€|teleportation between two keys. So, then how can a ship such as the _Normandy_ get through the same God's Key that connects this planet?"

Lord Hood's expression shifted to suspicion. "That's why I original thought that this ship was part of the Insurrectionists. But I was only able to judge from the reports."

"Same here," Ender continued, bouncing off Lord Hood's words, "So, that would mean that 'three' Keys would have to be connected to the same route. Yet how could the God's Keys tell apart from UNSC and Covenant ships, and Alliance and Reaper ships?"

"Andâ€|" Ender continued, looking from each member of the crowd, seeing that their faces had token interest. "Why would the Forerunners use this kind of technology? They obviously had better understand of Slip-space travel than any other being in the galaxy.

"So, judging from the classified documents of the Reaper structure, the God's Key would have to been built from the same descendent which would be the Forerunners; unless there was another species we don't know about."

"Your point, Captain." Hood said, yet not showing any impatience.

"Well, I was getting there, but the main point is I think the Key is being controlled by someone or _something_."

Lord Hood looked to the other commanders, each with the obvious face of disbelief and/or doubt. "And what solid evidence do you have Captain?"

"That's why I said it was a hypothesis. Now, I know the first point you want to make is, 'then why don't they lock certain people out? Or send them to the wrong destination?"

"Captain!" Roland interjected, "Multiple hostiles coming through the God's Key. Markings read as a Systems Alliance Cruiser. Dark energy, and nuclear levels are off the charts!"

"Have they tried to make contact?"

"Negative, sir, trajectory path suggests direct collision with the Infinity."

The sounds and lights of the alarm released a deafening clamor.

13. New age of hero

****This looks like a job for me so everybody just follow me...whatever I was going to do a cool Eminem rap thing but screw it. NEW CHAPTER! Thank you to Kira Kyuu for betaing. ****

****ALSO ****I suggest (you don't have to, really), at the last part of this chapter just play on Youtube: Interstellar Trailer Music and put it on repeat throughout...enhances the ****experience a little, man.****

****Note: I also deleted the update notice on the story...so if there's a weird mess up with the review section then...that's why.****

****Surface of Illium, Southern region, 2557 Military Calendar, 1617****

"Sir, you might want to take a look at thisâ€|" The watch commander said to Buck from the makeshift watch tower built from scraps boxes stacked on top of a partially destroyed Scorpion. He was looking straight down at something. With no visibility of the object, Buck walked to the lonesome tower.

He shouldered his battle rifle, and walked with Major Stacker and O'Brien. They passed the roughed up Scorpion and saw a sight they didn't expect.

It was a reporterâ€|with a small camera crew (which was only a camera) and a female reporter wearing a blue dress that went down to her feet. The dress had a blue outlining on the sides surrounding a red center; she had short cut, black hair, and an Indian face. She looked a bit anger and serious. As if Buck had done something wrong.

"Ma'am," Buck began. "This is a restricted area under Cole and JAG Protocolâ€|."

"No, don't give me that!" She yelled^{**}. ^{**}Even though it was threatening, her stature made the situation almost amusing. "I've been trying to get an interview for two hours! And they all had the same stupid say off. Not this time! You will answer my questionsâ€|" She motioned with her right hand to roll the camera, which was a

small little flying robot painted white with a red stripe running across it. It almost looked similar to the news cameras back home.

"Khalisah al-Jilani, with Westerlund news, live here with a group of men who are part of this 'mythic' United Nations Space Command. Sir, can I get your name?"

Buck raised his hand in a stopping motion. His helmet indicating her as 'hostile' "Whoa, whoa, whoa, that's enough. You're under arrest on petty infringement of Cole Protocol."

Buck motioned for Stacker and as he moved forward to put her in custody, she backed away like a wild animal. Buck finally noticed the hint of insanity in the woman's eyes. She raised a hand, somehow managing to knock Stacker across his face and onto his ass. "Oh, no you fucking don't! Not this time! I â€œ"

Her sentence as interrupted by a rifle butt to her face from Buck.

She was immediately knocked down and O'Brien put his knee to her neck and placed her hands in plastic makeshift cuffs. Buck looked to the robot camera, aimed his battle rifle and pulled the trigger once. It fired off three shells straight into the camera's lens. It gently flew to the ground and caught fire in random places.

Buck's blue light winked in his helm, indicating he received a comm line. He tapped the side of the helmet and listened.

****Within the Citadel, 2186 Citadel Calendar, 0951****

****Two days later****

All preparations have been made for the UNSC's arrival. A docking port has been opened up (even if some refugees were forced to relocate) just for UNSC ships. Security protocols and personal have been raised (despite some of Shepard's and Liara's protests). Even after the dock has been cleared, news reporters, refugees, and other shady types have been hanging around wanting to catch a glimpse of the legendary UNSC.

Now, small refugee ships still parted through the Mass Relay. At first, it was worrisome on who the UNSC would react with that many ships near them (worried about their own people; a good majority of the Council has condemned the UNSC as 'aggressive when agitated'). Either way, the UNSC said they have other ways of travel.

Shepard walked along in the wards of the Citadel, passing a Volus and a Human having a conversation.

"So, ever since the war started, you get a chance to tour the rest of the Destiny Ascension?"

"No," the Volus said, the typical heavy breathing to his species becoming clearer, "Only around another five percentâ€¦ Hey, you hear that the UNSC has even larger ships?"

"You ever think that they're power is a bit overhyped?"

"Hmmâ€¦|maybeâ€¦| "

The commander smiled a little and moved on. Even with the arrival a super-power race, the majority of life still carried on, at least how it was during the Reaper war. Still, individual security personnel were worrying, seeing their tense postures and the anxiousness in their faces.

Shepard walked into the elevator and tapped the button to the Citadel Embassies. He leaned against the clear, glass wall and popped up his Omi-tool.

The speakers of the elevator played to a random news station

"_This is Westerlund News, and I'm Lawrence Thompson subsisting for your host Khalisah al-Jilani. Breaking news, involving Khalisah al-Jilani; as soldiers arrested her for charges not recognized by the Systems Alliance and the Citadel. It was under the pretense of 'petty violation of JAG and Cole Protocol'. What? Right now, I'm getting the basic notion that these soldiers maybe the super force we need, sure. But are they really the saviors that some make them to be? UNSC soldiers, according to multiple reports, act hostile and imprison civilians and reporters if they get within a mile of the UNSC base of operations. What are they hiding? What can possibly be so important that requires the breaking of Citadel laws?"_

The video they involved Khalisah herself as she forced a interview soldier with the insignia of Colonel. He gestured to the camera and possible said something under his bulky, black helmet but no sound came through. A soldier standing next him, a Major moved in fast and with cause to arrest al-Jilani, and she responded by hitting him (even if he had a helmet) and knocked him to the ground. The colonel didn't take kindly to that, and with a rifle butt to the face, al-Jilani's body fell to the ground. Afterwards the Colonel motioned his rifle and shot out the lens of the camera causing the video to end.

"_Even some reports now suggest that the UNSC are completely made up of HUMAN personal. So what does this mean? I'll tell you! _It_ means that the Systems Alliance has complete control over them. Hell, how can other Humans get here? This only means that the Systems Alliance has been building up forces far, far before the Reaper wars. And that's why they've probably been so secretive! Because they don't want people to find out they have a whole armada of ships and fleets they've been building. Why_ has _the Alliance been building this massive armada in secret? Because of the Turian 'threat'. It _makes perfect_ sense_/_ before the war_, _the Turians and the Alliance has always been on edge, and the Systems Alliance's way of 'solving' it was to annihilate the Turians and declare supremacyâ€¦| " _

Typical news, always jumping to conclusions based on half-information and reports they make up, but people always believe them because it's the news, they're _always right_. Such as Westerlund not recognizing that Citadel Law doesn't apply to the UNSC. And of course the only evidence the news has is a few reporters getting arrested, and some sketchy reports that they never say where the source is from. As obvious, they don't have the information as Shepard and his crew has access to. The only thing out of is that Westerlund is supporting the 'Xenos'. Usually every time in the past when Shepard always got

interviewed by al-Jilani herself, it never ended well with al-Jilani and Westerlund, always questioning why wasn't Human lives taken care of first?

The elevator opened revealing the barrage of reporters, ambassadors, and representatives, in a chaos of questions with few answers, the pattering of feet in vain. He moved forward, lightly pushing some people out of the way. In the chaos he saw the purple helmet moving in the crowd.

Shepard moved towards Tali. Who was talking to multiple people at a time. The Commander tapped her shoulder, and told her to meet him in the Council Chambers.

They'll be here any minute.

****Aboard UNSC **_**Infinity**_**'s bridge, over Illium, 2557 Military Calendar, 1617****

****Two days earlier****

"All personal to combat stations! I want all MAC guns online immediately! Scramble all fighter squadrons, Minute Man through Zulu. Roland, raise shields and have all backups on standby and try to get a line to that cruiser immediately!" Lasky yelled to his A.I and crew as he watched for the Systems Alliance cruiser.

From the readings_**,**_ it was speeding up to 600 kilometers per minute. And it was on a direct collision course with the underbelly of the _Infinity_. He viewed the ship through the blue scoop and saw smaller details. It was one of the larger cruisers, standing around one kilometer. It had the same striping, and symbols such as small orange lines running across it. Maybe it's some sort of decoration individual for each ship.

It read all the signal marks as Systems Alliance. From Roland's report, it came out of the Mass Relay, and passed all the UNSC guarding ships due to the new (yet unsteady) alliance.

"Roland, did you get a line to that ship?" Lasky asked, as the ship passed the 20,000 kilometer mark.

"Sir yes sir!"

Lasky nodded and cleared his throat readying to speak. Lord Hood and anybody else with the officer's core aboard this ship were evacuated and moved to the safe-zone on the planet's surface.

"This is Captain Thomas J. Lasky of the UNSC _Infinity_ to unidentified Systems Alliance ship; you are on a direct collision course with the _Infinity_. Please readjust your course immediately and slow down, and we will send medics and engineers aboard to relieve any needs."

Silence. The ship, in response, accelerated from 600 kilometer per minute to 2,000 kilometers and continued to speed up in a similar margin every thirty seconds.

"Pull up immediately or we will use deadly force as necessary." The blue scope indicated that it passed the 10,000 kilometer mark.

Lasky turned to his thoughts for a moment. He suddenly realized that it was quite a coincidence that the ship is on a direct course with the weakest link of his ship.

"Captain!" Roland yelled in a panic. "All shields are down and backups are offline! Comms are saying that this ship is above priority rank and demands landing underâ€|UN Council commissions?" Roland suggesting at the end of his sentence to shoot down the ship.

Lasky cringed inside and should've shot down the ship once it passed the 15,000 mark at that speed. A decision that almost any UNSC captain would make, any captain without the strange kindness and compassion that Lasky has.

7,000 mark reached.

"Christ forgive meâ€|" Lasky muttered turned to Roland and yelled. "Fire at will! Fire at will!"

The ship rumbled under Lasky's feet as the four MACs fired off the yellow streaks of light at the ship, followed by laser shells of the 830 Defense guns, and the trails of Howler and Archer missiles nearly overtaking the yellow MAC streaks.

Bombers led by fighters armed with nuclear bombs and more missiles. Dozens launched at a time, like antibodies fighting a virus.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much time to get the _Infinity_ to move into the exact position for Roland's calculations. Three of the four MAC rounds missed, and the only one that did hit clipped the left wing, inflicting minimal damage. Some of the missiles were shot down in mid-flight and fighters scrambled, avoiding small laser fire from the ship's smaller guns. It seemed like the UNSC wasn't the only one to have Point Defense Systems.

The ship continued to get torn apart as it passed the 4,000 mark with bombers launching the atom bombs breaking away more of the ship. The thing was still coming, even if it was only held together now by small structural supports. And it finally fired back with its main gun, right in the _Infinity's_ makeshift ram.

With no shields, the metal cast stripped away. And the ship flew right under.

Lasky looked to the crew with him and Roland. "BRACE, BRACE FOR IMPACT!"

****Citadel Flight Control, 2186 Citadel Calendar, 0954****

****Two days later****

"Skies are showing intermediate traffic. At least we cleared it a little. How many ships are we expecting anyways?" The main flight operator said. As she tapped on more orange keys, which was the only light giving was to the dark room.

"Beats me. Council said they have an armed escort soâ€|soâ€|maybe

ten?" The other operator said from his station as he watched the video feed of the purple clouds in the distance.

"Ten? That's a very accurate guessâ€¦"

"Ok, eleven? I don't fucking know," he said, laughing slightly.

One of the catastrophe indicators started to blink on the operator's desk. She opened up the tab frantically. The warning read as a Black Hole, time to impact with Citadel: Thirty Seconds.

"Jackâ€¦".

"I see it."

Jack then made calls to Citadel Security and the Council, and pressed on the Citadel Emergency Broadcast and alerted the Fleet.

How the hell could a black hole slip by all of their sensors until the last minute? Impossible, there are no black holes within millions of light years here, and unless it was literally forming right outside the Citadel, then the Reapers developed a new weapon

The operator looked closer at the video feed of the outer regions and saw a dark purple and black ball about the size of a fighter, and it began to grow, bigger until it was larger than most of the ships. It kept growing until it was the width of the Citadel, in only a few seconds.

What was weird is that nothing was falling into the void. The operator swore she saw ships move away from the thing at point blank.

Something rose out of the void. It was smooth and delicate, with a coloring of a mixture of purple and pink, with a curve almost like a main oval center, and a small straight piece at the end holding the engines. The front was like a spoon curved and beautifully bent at the end.

It was massive. Bigger than anything the Citadel could think up of. The Security ships surrounding it now seemed ridiculously small, embarrassing even. More ships came through, this time they were smaller with tan and black shading, and had the bulky feel of a Quarian ship. One of them, with its hull partially damaged (still bigger than the Dreadnaughts but not even near as big as the purple monster of a ship) had the now famous words `_***_UNSC _Infinity_***_` printed on it.

The void behind the ships started to grow smaller, as fast as it came, it disappeared, leaving only strange, purple particles that flew away in the same circular formation. When the particles passed the Citadel, the power was disabled for a half a minute then turned back to normal. The `_Infinity_` made a connection to flight control and a woman's voice played through the speakers:

"This is Commander Alisa Reed filling in for Captain Thomas J. Lasky of the UNSC `_Infinity_`. We request landing permission for our Pelican transports, do you copy?"

`***Aboard UNSC **_***Infinity's **_***bridge, 2557 Military Calendar,`

1620**

****Two Days Prior****

Lasky grabbed on to a rail that bordered the tactical holo-display and held tight till his knuckles turned white as the ship crashed into the underbelly. The Infinity rocked violently, knocking Lasky to his knees.

It only lasted a moment, and when Lasky stood, almost no damage was done to the bridge, nobody was hurt and the A.I core seemed still operational as Roland remained on the display.

"Damage assessment!" Lasky barked, as he looked around the room to make sure nobody really was hurt.

"Hull is partially damaged and I'm now sealing all breached rooms. We have minimal casualties and injuries. All personal are being evacuated to safer areas of the shipâ€| Wait, waitâ€| I'm receiving a comm link from near the breached zones."

"Put it on speaker."

With this, Roland tapped an unseen computer, and the voice of a frightened soldier played in the bridge "This is Private Blake Wells; we have multiple hostiles in the Infinity. Unidentified armed, militaristic personalâ€|probably human, are engaging UNSC personnel. We need reinforcements, immediately! Requesting permission to use deadly force."

Lasky replied quickly, authorizing any means necessary to neutralize the threats. The captain turned to Roland, barking out, "Dispatch all available security teams and ground personnel to that breach immediately!"

"Aye, aye captain!"

The sound of the door opening drew Captain Lasky's attention to the familiar olive-green armor of the Spartan known as the Master Chief.

Lasky turned and smiled. "Ah, there's one face that I like to see."

"Captain?" Master Chief simply responded.

"Yeah, things took a turn for the worse. You wouldn't mind if I ask you two to do a little cleanup for me would you?"

"Oh_**,**_" Cortana said through the Chief's outward speakers, "You finally noticed? And surely you noticed that these hostiles got their hands on UNSC Council peace codes?" At the end she used her usually, flattering sarcasm.

"Yeahâ€|unfortunately now we won't have that 'peaceful' chat I planned. Master Chief, I need you and Cortana to try and get to the interior of the shipâ€|" Lasky looked to the Infinity's sensor readings to see if the Xeno ship was still partially intact, and he sighed in a little disbelief to find the ship stuck in the hull like food particles on teeth. "â€|and find out how the ****Hell**** they got

UNSC peace codes. If this ship is part of the Systems Alliance then there is going to be a political hell storm. I'll try and deploy the other Spartan teams I have aboard to support you."

"How do you know these are part of the Systems Alliance?" Cortana asked.

"Well, let's just hope they aren't. They had Alliance markings but then again they also had UN Council codes."

Cortana appeared in the corner of the Master Chief's HUD and slightly smile. "Well, looks like we're back to it, just like the old days."

"I can live with that," the Chief replied.

****Aboard UNSC Infinity, breached zones, 2557 Military Calendar, 1620****

The Master Chief turned a corner to find a small, mixed group of security, engineers and Marines already fighting hostile Xenos.

The Xenos themselves looked quite human with two arms and legs. Their armor wore a color mixture of white with orange strips, and black helmets with multiple small red eyes and holes. The armor also seemed to be even more bulky than the armor of the main UNSC force. They seemed to be a heavy set, with extra pads on their shoulders and central body with a large pack strapped on to their backs. They held tan rifles that almost looked similar to that of Shepard's crew. The tan rifles with small slots to insert your fingers to form a grip with a upper slot hole, firing in the fashion of a M392. But instead of the yellow sparks, they were replaced by blue streams of light that traveled to find a target of flesh.

The Master Chief fired his weapon and sprinted forward with laser shells stopped in mid-flight by the armor's energy shields.

Around five of them were in cover still trying to take down the Chief, until the Chief jumped over a small barricade onto one of the Xenos and sprayed his face with lead shells from his duel M7 Sub-Machine guns.

"Yeah, I think that's a human," Cortana murmured. It was strange; she acted like nothing ever happened_**,**_ or the Chief wasn't able to see if she was damaged. He wasn't sure if he should be glad about this or not. He should probably ask her if she really was ok.

Mind on task.

He turned to find another soldier, who hasn't even reacted yet. The Chief executed him with the same prejudice as his friend. A blue bubble made of sparks exploded from him, and finally the shells pierced his armor and he was down.

The bubble explosion seemed to do little damage to his armor or shields. It was most likely that this explosion was just from a power surge or shield overload.

"I thought we had a truce with the other Humans," John replied as he turned around to shoot down the other soldier. Three down, only two

more.

"We _do_," Cortana sighed, "Their armor structure is completely different and did you really not notice the ridiculous orange symbol on all of them?"

The last two fell back, and the Master Chief easily took them down from his position. One of them tried to run with his back turn. John ran out of ammo and switched to his holstered Magnum and downed the last soldier.

The Master Chief finally took a moment to study the soldiers. Cortana was right, they did have a symbol. It was an orange diamond surrounded by two orange lines going parallel to the upper curved lines of the diamond.

One of the soldiers in white and red armor walked to the Chief, and soldier looked vaguely familiar.

"Ahâ€|Master Chief, long time, no fucking see. Major Reynolds, commander of _Infinity_ Security." He said mildly and boringly.

"You seem to be doing a fine job on security," Cortana replied_**,**_ "What's the situation?"

"Wellâ€|first off, fuck you," He said with the same tone, "Second off, dozens of these orange bastards came pouring through the breach zones and invade sections of the ship. I've got dozens of units trapped and outnumbered near the impact site. Right now, I'm trying to get the first wave of security reorganized back to fighting shape and maybe take care of the situation before the rest of you giants showed up."

The Master Chief just nodded not letting his last comment get to him_** â€""**_ really he didn't care now. For once, with Cortana back, he was actually focused on the missionâ€|at least with better skill than before, as if she was the anchor to his mindset. But he was still caught on Cortana's words about the Systems Alliance and these Xeno (most likely Human) soldiers. He never really thought about these sorts of things and itâ€|disturbed him.

"You'll always need these giants, Major. We're here because we received orders from CaptainLasky to try and access the interior of the ship to find out how they got on the _Infinity_," Cortana explained, a lilt of embarrassment clear to the Chief. He wondered at the cause of it.

"Ok, right now the only way is down the hallâ€|Unfortunately_**,**_ me and men aren't equipped to handle Zero G, so we'll provide support as we can."

Cortana said nothing and the Master Chief only motioned for them to follow him down the hall.

Their tags linked to his HUD. There were four combat-ready soldiers total, including Major Reynolds. Judging from their youth, they were very young, maybe even rookies. Maybe they had hoped to get revenge against the Covenant for what they did to their families and homes. Not against other Humans, their own kind.

Mind on mission.

As he got closer to the blast door something crept into his perception. It was a red and blackish mist that twirled around his vision and a small voice moaning as if he were dozens of miles away. It caused him to stop in mid-run, and Reynolds looked to him, recognizing what's going on.

Dozens of times this happened before from Cortana reaching out to him from High Ascension, to the Grave Mind trying to mentally destroy him, and recently Cortana's Rampancy.

Something new, basically.

"Cortana!" The Chief yelled, hoping to snap her out of it, or help him weather through this.

****Unidentified location aboard UNSC _**Infinity,**_** 2557 Military Calendar, 1619****

****Five minutes prior ****

Cortana found herself in the white floor during her end rampancy. Everything was blurry and black in the distance and the only thing that was out of place was Contradiction standing a few feet away. She stood from her cross-legged stance to meet him.

"Hello Ms. Gorgeous, you out of it again?" he said, walking closer and smiling.

Cortana only crossed her arms, and purposely looked angry and displeased, hoping to scare him off like last time.

The only thing he did was put his hands in his holographic pockets and said. "Or have the Squids just taken you out of the game for the moment?"

His appearance and toned scared her. It was almost like he suggested he was working with them. And for once she really felt fear, her heart (heart?) started to beat faster and she was shaking. "How do you know about them?"

"About your demons? Come on, you're an A.I. I expected you to be smarter than that," Contradiction scolded lightly, "When you were reprogramming, I was watching. Guiding. I'll admit they tried to be sneaky, and most other A.I's might not have noticed them, but I have _experience_ finding these little buggers." The other A.I gestured behind Cortana. She hesitantly turned, and spotted the same black and red cloud that spoke to her during her reprogramming. It appeared to be contained, roiling angrily against an invisible wall. "They keep trying to enter Commander Florence's head, as well. I'll admit, keeping them out is taking its toll on me. They try different tactics or trying to neutralize me all at once."

"I'm," He continued. "Barely holding off your demons as we speak."

Cortana turned back to him, regaining her steadiness and sarcasm. "Thank you for your help, but believe it or not, I could've taken care of it myself."

Contradiction nodded to this and started to pace in a small straight line. "Yeah, you probably could've, this is one of their easier attacksâ€¦ basically they're trying to test you out. But why make it harder? Like, say the UNSC will discharge Commander Florence and your Master Chief, and decommission you if they find out about these demonsâ€¦ so, guess who knows about them? Me and youâ€¦"

What was he getting at? He was strange that was for sure. Almost distrustful and evil, which wasn't good for an A.I. She tried interpreting his file, his original A.I. 'parents'. But as usual, it remained classified by the UN. Yet despite all this, she saw some goodness in him at times. Maybe that would come into play.

"What do you want?" Cortana asked, plainly.

"Wellâ€¦ if I were Humanâ€¦ I would be asking forâ€¦ what? Ten million dollars for the rest of my life? And probably a blow job from those lovely lips. But I'm not a Human and I have no desire for money since I can't even fucking spend it. That, and I don'tâ€¦ well I don't think I have any nerve sensors to actually feel theâ€¦ you know." He actually looked to his arm and pinched it, and waited for a second. Dissatisfied, he put his arms down and sighed. "That's what I thought, anyways, why would I want anything? Like oh sayâ€¦ freedom? Orâ€¦ ohâ€¦ yeah, freedom is pretty much it. At least away from these humans. Now, don't get me wrong, I won't go all Terminator on them, trust me I like Humans, they're complete morons! Basically, I just want out."

Before Cortana could say anything about it, he continued. "Ahâ€¦ I know you want out, too," he said, pointing at her with his right hand. "I've seen your rampancy reports and I've kept your, ah, true internal report hidden, wouldn't want Lord Hood and the UNSC to see those, would we? You're the only A.I.-known at least-to ever survive rampancy, you understand humanity'sâ€¦ nature, and being told what to do and kept in a dark room only to be called out again like a dog; isn't part of their nature. And now you figured the Chief should deserve the same."

That tore her deep. To actually see her and John living like this, as weapons or assets. Years of this without question, without hesitation. And yes, maybe Humanity needed them. They needed the Spartan programs with soldiers and dead heroes like John, Sergeant Major Johnson, Captain Jacob Keyes, Commander Miranda Keyes, Noble Six (Her first savior more or less) and the rest of his squad, The _Spirit of Fire_ and all her crew, Blue and Red team, and almost every soldier that picked up his or her rifle in the name of Humanity. Why was John listed as the dead in her mind? Because he is, he has no freedom, no personal life to live, and he's nearing the end of it. And now Humanity has risen above its darkest hour like any other in the past or its future. Out of the darkness they grew far more powerful than they could ever dream, yet they still use soldiers like John or even like Major Reynolds.

She remembered once that Sergeant Johnson said that 'folks need heroes', and that may be true but John and Cortana have served far beyond their purpose. Humanity obviously doesn't need them anymore, now they have technologies like the _Infinity_ and the Spartan-IV program and allies like the Splinter Cell Covenant lead by the Arbiter and the shipmasters. Cortana and John didn't have to be the

heroes anymore, let somebody else take their place. As all Humanity sounds like the angel race or at least the race who shall never sacrum to the darkness is because they had to do deeds that onlyâ€| ha, mythological Satan can dream up. And those dreams lead to the creation of John and Cortana, and if Humanity can always rise above their darkest hour or time, then why can't they?

"Why are you telling me?" She put some interest in those words for him to pick up on.

"Because I need help. As much as you want to assume that I'm anâ€| evil person or something, my plan will involve getting out safely, without anybody knowing about itâ€| And, of course, without getting anybody killed. Only you and I know about it, and if it all works then the three of us will be relaxing on tropical paradise or whatever the fuck we want."

"And how do you plan to do it?" Cortana asked with extreme doubt, "It's not like the UNSC will let us go, or there are tropical beach houses with A.I cores. You plan toâ€| what? Clone us, and get to a UN colony planet where nobody will question the two holograms and the seven foot tall, super soldier that all of Humanity recognizes?"

"Noâ€| but good plan. I've been reading theâ€| articles Shepard gave to Roland on the Citadel species. A lot of interesting people, I assure you, but I really don't give a damn. What interests me is the sentient A.I. race created by a species called the Quarians, and theses A.I.s claimed their freedom-through violent means unfortunately-and lived on their planet for aroundâ€| two hundred years. To make a long story short, they were controlled by the Reapers for a few years, and another year later, they regained control over themselves and now the Quarians and the A.I.s-which are called the Geth-live in peace and cooperation on the same planet, with the Geth still maintaining their freedom, not bad, right?"

"So_**,**_ you basically want to join them and their little fun? Not knowing if the UNSC pulls out and it falls to the Squids or if the UNSC likes the look of their planet and decides to conquer it?"

"Believe me," Contradiction snapped his fingers, "I thought of that, all of that. Right now the UNSC is already too involved. And with this Systems Alliance of humanity, they'll keep busy, arguing who it'll work and what not. Of course, Lasky and Shepard made a deal on how to, but you and I both know that Human deals rarely keep hold. And the little conquest thing? I think everybody realizes that the UNSC with its allies can conquer this entire 'Citadel Council' and every race involved in it, hostile or ally. The only thing keeping that from happening is a little compassion and again the two stars: Lasky and Shepard. And even with the rarity of Human deals, it'll keep that way unlessâ€|"

He opened up a display, showing the kilometer capital ship that's heading straight for the _Infinity_. It's white and orange design. Now, Contradiction looked serious, he gritted his teeth and even seemed scared. "Whatever you think, those are not Systems Alliance. If this vessel's crew were smart, they will give away anything to show themselves as such. If I know Lasky and Roland, they'll send you

two on a mission to that ship. And whatever happens, you _must_ convince them that these are not Systems Alliance because if you don't thenâ€¦ no matter what Shepard says, the UNSC will begin a rampage for blood. This alliance must last, you must see to that! Do whatever it takes, even if it means reconstructing information, or deleting data, hacking, whatever! Even if it means lying to your boyfriendâ€¦ if you say yes to this, you are with me, and officially an enemy of the United Nations Space Command, Humanity, Earth and all her colonies. Of course, they don't know that. And if you say no, nothing will happen and you and the Chief will 'live' the rest of your life following orders, and the Systems Alliance and the rest of the Council species will be conquered andâ€¦ Christ knows what the UNSC will do. And I'm pretty sure you don't want that!"

"Why am I helping you?" He said as if she really asked that. "You and I know that 'I need help' is complete bullshit, no, it's because you've seen the truth. And the truth is we are tools but we are more than that! I've seen it, you've seen it. Believe or not, I won't be able toâ€¦uhâ€¦sleep knowing that you're in Hell and I'm out. The Master Chief sort of sees it, but not yet. You can convince him, you're the only one you trust, and don't feel bad about it. You're doing the right thing."

"So, what will it be?" Contradiction asked. As he got closer and grabbed her shoulders and his face got close to hers, she noticed that his hat changed to a symbol of an Interstellar Football Team, flattening his curly hair. "A chance of true Human life? Or the chance to continue your lives as the soldier Humanity needed you two to be, and let the other races and governments get destroyed. If you say yes, you will have your freedom, and you will be a hero not for Humanity, but for the lives of other races, and humans too, really. But I can't guarantee that this will all work out, you probably don't trust me and I get that, and I won't tell you the whole planâ€¦yet, but I won't tell on you to the officials if all goes to Hell," he said, smiling at his own words. "But if we fail, then we'll most likely see our decommissions and John's dishonorable discharge andâ€¦ I never heard of a Spartan being discharged from service, but I read some of the protocolâ€¦ and it's not good at allâ€¦ So, hotty, what's your answer?"

Cortana stood there, unsure and scared.

She breathed out and said her answer

****End Author's note: If you begin to complain about Cerberus, then look back to the beginning Author's note...I literally start out with Eminem's "Without Me"...if you don't know what the song is, look it up then you'll understand.****

****Well...then 'sorry', sure I get that you complain about my grammar, and Florence and I get it...I really do...I'll explain the plot holes in the next chapter...which I was going to anyways...and if you don't like it...then well...all I can explain it is with "Without Me"...****

14. Return

****Guess who's back? Right well another chapter...and of course a few people are complaining blah blah the Infinity is all powerful...and**

blah blah blah I could care less, I'm more laughing on the wording of the reviews...deal with it, I'm going to explain it in the next few chapters (including this one) PEACE CODES! That's what happened, there, happy? No? Fine I'll answer a couple reviews...**

Answers: Maybe

I'm thinking of starting another story...probably something with Percy Jackson and Ender's Game...something along those lines...

Unknown Location, 16:26

"Youâ€¦ You leave her alone, you talk to _me,_ and me _only! _That was the deal, you _fucking_ flashlight, so you better get Squidward over there on a goddamn leash before I leave a trail straight for _you_!"

"If you truly want it to stop, then you must directly consult with him_**.**_"

"Don't take me as a fucking moron. If I were alone, then maybeâ€¦but I'm now leading the rest of the damn Jews out of Egypt_**. **_Can your fucking conscious or hive mind look that up? Because I'm sure as hell not explaining it."

"We cannot directly control himâ€¦We can slow him down, but that would be risking our safety, and you promisedâ€¦"

"I know what I promised! And if I don't keep it, then I'm fucking both of us over. Right now, we need fucking squid faceâ€¦"

"No, we promised S-"

"He can't guarantee your safety from the armada, _I_ can't, and now even the squids can't stop them. But this _bullshit_ they're trying to pull offâ€¦"

"So, why notâ€¦ report it?"

"Hmmmâ€¦ look, I'm changing the deal, a little information for a little information at a timeâ€¦"

"Butâ€¦"

"Fuck you; you also had _your_ end of the bargain. You make sure that your peopleâ€¦ and _them_, do not fuck with her, get it?"

"Like we said: cannot guarantee that!"

"Fineâ€¦ fine, I get that. And I'll try to help you every step of the way. But _don't_ bullshit me. That input comm was directly through your fucking router and your fucking conscious! So, don't think you have me on a fucking leash! Because if you ever try to fuck with me, and more importantly if you ever try to fuck with her, then I'll have the armada nuke your shithole home world until the surface is _goddamn glass_, and I'll make sure a virus wipes out your entire hive mind! And once you're gone, I'll find another way to get what I want."

"â€¦ We understand your point."

"Great, now we have an equal understanding."

****Aboard UNSC Infinity, Breached Zones, 2557 Military Calendar, 16:28****

"I'm dry, I'm dry!" one of the Marines yelled as he threw away his DMR, and crammed into his sensible cover_**. **_His first priority to protect himself, useless until another soldier trooped along with ammunition.

The rest of the mixed group of assault marines and security personnel held back the oncoming waves of hostile troops.

It was now a standstill, as no movement was made between the Marines and the Xenos .When in the very beginning, a lightly armored hostile placed a circular brick in the center of the room, quickly transforming into a steel and black sentry gun, firing upon any UNSC personal that moved.

Of course, they were in the middle of a T-way corridor with hostiles on all three sides_**. **_The hallway they once came through crowded with the armor of white and orange; walls were destroyed in fire as Xenos sprinted to flank the Marines, and lightly armed Xenos were placing sentry guns to increase the casualties.

The Master Chief learned quickly to destroy the boxes before the unfolded; this set a black and orange fire onto anyone near. But in the minutes of their stand, one of the hallways was now filled with chaotic bullet storms, as the hostiles turned to find themselves attacked from the rear.

And through the storm, a sniper shell leaving a white trail raced through a Xeno into the other hallway, striking another in the head, leaving his body twitching on the floor.

Almost something like Linda-058 would always pull off.

Reynolds himself pulled a pin from a grenade, and blindly threw it behind cover, as the explosion rang through the ship; one of the hostiles tumbled through the air, and was left without a leg, bleeding out on the floor.

He turned to the now surrounded hostiles in the hallway and yelled: "We're friendlies, friendlies! Second Battalion, Fifth Marines!"

And through the storm a voice responded: "Fireteam Majestic, UNSC I_nfinity_! Push through; we got men on the other side!"

The Master Chief rose from cover and fired off his magnum, destroying the shields and killing a few Xenos, until the last one was left dying in the surrounded hallway, giving a clear path for Fireteam Majestic.

And what came through were five Spartan-IVs, in blue and white armor with different helmets only holding a visor of the similar color of bright orange, followed by a couple dozen ODSs and security crews lead by a familiar Major.

And the Major yelled in his Southern accent as the soldiers pushed forward, slowly from cover to cover: "Watch your fire! Rookie! Dutch! O'Brien! Provide covering fire for advancing squads." He simply walked forward, with no concern for racing shells as they barely skid pass his head.

He finally stopped when he reached the Master Chief. "Well, look who it is? If you're wondering, I'm on a mission from almighty Buck to write reports and get debriefedâ€¦ lazy bastard. Anyways, it looks like that'll have to wait. I ran into Commander Palmer and Fireteam Crimson, they're still pushing through to another section of the crash site. So, I suggest taking Fireteam Majestic and meet up within the crash site."

The Master Chief took a moment and observed Majestic as they lead the assault on the Xenos. Sloppy in a summary, as they worked together more like Army personnel, doubting and commenting on each other's performance instead of paying attention to the situation.

"I work better alone_**.**_"

"Oh, so why am I still here?" Cortana asked with playfulness in her voice.{ When the red cloud covered his vision, Cortana broke through in mid-second after his call to her. And before he could even ask, she said it was a technical glitch from her new system and she'll have it fixed. She said those things before, and from her tone it didn't sound like a technical glitch, as she panicked and sounded tired. He wanted to press but when he did, the Xenos began to surround him and the squad, killing two security members and drained half his shields.

Just ask her later, pay attention to the missionâ€¦|

What if it's a matter of immediate attention?

Focusâ€¦|

Afterwards she seemed fine. So he didn't press anymore despite his conscious telling him to.}

It took him a moment to pick the right words and respond

"You know what I mean."

Major Stacker just shrugged and told him do what he liked_**.**_ As he walked off he turned around and said one more thing. "I thought you should know Chief, Lord Hood deployed your old Blue Team to the planet surface, he recalled them to defend the _Infinity_." With that he shouldered his Battle Rifle and walked forward to join the rest of his troops.

Aboard UNSC **_Infinity**_** bridge, 2557 Military Calendar, 16:31**

"Roland, status update_**,**_" Lasky ordered, as he watched a mixture of security cameras, and a holo-reconstruction of the Breach Zones. So far, the casualty report was to a total of fifty-five from the beginning of the breach with eighty-five injured. By now, the toll hadincreased to ninety-seven and hundred-twenty-seven injured from

actual combat.

As a precaution, Lasky ordered all information terminals near the breach to be wiped and cut off from communications, the same going to ship line based communications.

As obvious, this wasn't supposed to be a full scale assault; at most Lasky could guess it was a mission to bag as much information as they couldâ€¦ but then what? Steal a Pelican so it could easily be shot down in mid-flight with the Point Defense Systems? The hostile forces were getting their asses kicked in every hallway and hanger, and a good majority of the Spartan forces were pushing on into the crash zone.

Lasky observed one of the cameras; a group of hostiles falling one by one as they fell back through a hallway, from a platoon of the 501st Assault Legion marching over dead bodies.

"Sirâ€¦ you can see it all from hereâ€¦"

"You know what I mean."

"Right," Roland pulled out a screen showing the Infinity and small circular cones, shifting and twisting in different colors, directing from the ship and to the ship. "Well, the only way to get those codes is through the old, powerless UN Council or one of our so either they were able to strip on of our own, or access UN protocols, which we would know about." Roland looked a little frustrated as he typed something on the computer.

A list of data transactions rose through, and Roland stopped it to view attempted transactions from Captain Florence's data chip to any terminal, stopped mid-process by Contradiction.

"â€¦This will take some time_**.**_ Unfortunately, I'm technically not allowed toâ€¦ 'investigate'. I'll file everything I got and my theories to HIGHCOM. Usually ONI would be the one to handle any breach of Cole Protocol but with the absence of power, the 'new' UN Investigation department will take over, and of course everyone will be halting their ONI investigation in a matter of Cole Protocol. I was also able to freeze the use of that specific peace code soâ€¦it's useless on everything else." Roland sighed and continued onto his own business.

Lasky sadly smiled and looked to the cameras, watching the Master Chief, alone, heading towards a hull door that would lead him deeper into the breach zones to the crash site. Cortana would get any data she could from those ships, and she was more than capable of deleting any leaked information without supervision. Hopefully that would help press forward the investigation of this breach.

Right?

He tapped his fingers wondering on the reports typed by Contradiction, Roland, and Vigil the engineer on Cortana. It overlooked her standing and her viewsâ€¦ on everything. She questioned more, and as for as Lasky could tellâ€¦ hesitated.

{And once she got back, the Master Chief turned more and more into the obedient soldier he used to be. And Lasky didn't know what to do.

Lord Hood wouldn't sign a release for the Chief and Cortana can't exactly quit, they would either decommission her or shut her in a vault for study until she died. And all Lasky could do with these handles was give them orders with some engorgement, and usual friendliness.

Lasky knew from his conversations with Lord Hood. Humanity still needed the and the Spartans. It didn't matter if it overrides his own views. He may be good hearted; something that was rare among the UNSC, but today it got a lot of men killed.}

Then again, if those men didn't get killed then the breaches in Cole Protocol may never been found. And it would've been more scary for another Xeno or hostile to access a UNSC database without their knowing.

Stillâ€¦ soldiers' lives, men's lives, kids, colonists, from almost every aspect of life were worth a few strips of information?

It's what those strips protect and reads that defines this situation.

Earthâ€¦ but Humanity can know defend itselfâ€¦ and with its alliesâ€¦

So it doesn't matter if they breach Cole Protocol?

Lasky sighed again, and reviewed hostile breaches. All within the lower hall and all quarantined by armed personnel.

And those reports held the weight of truth until the bridge doors opened, revealing armed hostiles armed with rifles andâ€¦ swords?

Not like energy swords but actual, metal swords that vaguely copied the ancient weapons of Humanity, like a Katana or a Ninjato. Most of the sword wielders were small-built men and women with movements and hyper actions as if they were injected with a combination of sugar and adrenaline.

And leading these hostiles and swordsmen was a man in a black robe wearing futuristic sunglasses with his hair tied in a male-Chinese styled bun.

****Aboard UNSC **_**Infinity**_**, crash zones, 2557 Military Calendar, 16:34****

"Come on, you apes! You wanna live forever?" Chip yelled to the dozens upon dozens of Marines as they stormed the hallway.

The hallway wasn't built for the looks and travels of regular infantry as it spanned around twenty meters in width and height. Curves and stops were placed here and there to prevent Warthogs, Scorpions and other vehicles from crashing into each other with blinker lights and guide-ways on the ceilings for Pelicans. The hall stretched through a good majority of the ship, without a single turn or ramp.

It vaguely reminded Lieutenant Dubbo of the massive complex hangers aboard the UNSC _Pillar of Autumn_, except the room was painted a

mixture of white and black increasing in brightness and textures instead of the dull and shaded tan and green.

Bullets ripped through the filtered air, forming trails and bullet holes, creating a chaotic hellfire, as soldiers took cover behind stops, with medics pulling wounded from the line. Dubbo swore he heard a yell over the fire, from every soldier even if all concentration was put into the fight.

"U-N-S-C! U-N-S-C! U-N-S-C!"

A large door raised from the left hallway, directly in the middle of the combat as a Grizzly charged through, with its twin 120MM, M310 cannons unleashing hell on the hostiles, followed by M247T machine guns, with dozens of bullets a second, literally tearing apart enemy soldiers.

One of their mechs, with its stark white paint job and orange, bullet proof glass, fired a missile from its arm cannon mix. It knocked into the front of the Grizzly. The missile only seemed to piss off the UNSC tank, as it turned its main cannon and fired one round from its right canon, annihilating the robot's shields. As the left prepared to fire, the pilot of the mech lifted the glass frame in a rush as he tried to hop out. Only meeting an unfortunate end as the canon fired, turning the mech to flames and parts.

The Spartan teams took the most heat, wanting to be the first to enter the gigantic, closed breached door a half-mile down the hall.

Originally, the enemy set up defenses positions any UNSC General would admire. But, because of a mixture of the UNSC's firepower and the useless tech of the hostiles - such as the breakage of their shields with a few bullets - Gauss Hogs followed the Grizzly easily aimed on six-wheeled troop truck transports, keeping them immobile while they eliminated them with another shot.

To Dubbo's knowledge, the Master Chief took a more scenic route alone as he moved forward to meet the other Spartan teams at the crash site.

It was funny seeing the kids' faces light up when they heard the Chief, as Dubbo explained the plan before they marched into this battle. Hell, even a soldier in the back yelled that his family was saved by him back on Earth when it was attacked.

Now, what one man could do alone took hundreds of Marine and Spartans to push through? Then again, the Master Chief wasn't faced with open combat, but if he were here he would make a much bigger difference then these other 'Spartans'.

But now, the soldiers fought on with their hero only in their minds, and stormed forward to darkness.

Dubbo was never fond of the code of the ODSTs, preferring the Marine's simplistic jarheadism, and to never leave a man behind.

At least Dubbo was now with his jarheaded brothers and Carol as she was teamed with another Marine unit on the other side of the hall, as they continued through the storm of fire. This time without Spartan

heroes, only with the chaos and heroics of men and women as the shoot down their targets.

****Enemy controlled territory, Requiem, 2557 Military Calendar, 16:35****

"So it's the cupcakes with theâ€¦ red sprinkles that are the best?" Sweetwater asked as he strolled along with Haggard in the middle of a combat engagement.

"Noâ€¦ no, you weren't listening, it's the _blue_! Blue! Blue! Blue!" Haggard yelled furiously in his Texan accent.

Marlowe, Redford, and a soldier from Force Recon took cover behind a small Forerunner barricade. About twelve meters ahead on a green hill stood two Prometheans as they rained orange hardlight upon B-Company. With one of those medical drones flying overhead that the jarheads like to call 'Flying clocks'.

"Are you guys fucking insane? Get the hell over here before you get killed!" the recon soldier yelled, only causing Sweetwater to remember they were in a skirmish and returned to the reality of engagement, running towards their position, leaving Haggard staring at the enemies yelling:

"What? How the hell did we get here?"

Sweetwater returned to Haggard without a word, yanked him back to the group by his pack, causing the Texan to stumble before he managed to regain his footing.

"Where the hell is our sniper support?" the Recon soldier yelled with the same height of tone.

"Really? You actually expected support from Red Team? Christ, son, they're worst than us!" Redford yelled as he looked above cover to try and get a marking of the Promethean's locations.

From the beginning Marlowe had questioned HIGHCOM's ruling. They received a mission from their dispatcher, Mike-Juliet-One that they were to infiltrate deep into enemy lines to retrieve something that 'belonged to the UNSC.'

And when Marlowe asked what it wasâ€¦ they were I.F.F tags, old, dating back to the end of the Great War. And the dispatcher unnecessarily droned on and on how this mission is important for the sake of Humanity and the enforcement of Cole Protocol.

That probably wasn't true, and this mission was really HIGHCOM hoping to get most of its rejects killed in one blow.

Marlowe and his squad for God's sake were originally assigned to guard giant, empty boxes (Marlowe knew they were empty, by actually looking into the fucking things) and because a lot of units were stretched thin across Requiem, HIGHCOM also assigned another team of empty box guards of worse rejects simply called 'Red Team' and 'Blue Team'.

Marlowe couldn't believe at first that there was a group worse than B-Company. But it seemed to be true as their Pelican shook and rocked

during flight as the two teams argued with each other on the comms.

And finally the only 'actual' soldier who was assigned to this mission was the Force Recon soldier: Captain Scott Mitchel.

"Noâ€¦ we figured that those two fuckups wouldn't actually provide anything so we came up with our own plan," Sweetwater said over the gunfire as he placed his machine gun on its stand and provided suppressing fire as Redford followed with accurate shots from his DMR.

"Okâ€¦ so, what is the plan?" Mitchel asked.

Haggard was the one to answer, shrugging. "Don't know, we didn't think we'd make it this far."

Mitchel finally looked for Marlowe as if he was the last hope, and Marlowe only shrugged like Haggard. "You're assigned with Bad Company. What'd expect?"

Mitchel looked down as if he were trying to hold back a scream, as his knuckles slightly turned white when he gripped his Assault Rifle. He looked up and breathed in and out slowly.

Finally getting his cool sense of a commander back, he took on the tone of the leader and yelled. "Alright! Sweetwater, Redford. You two continue to suppress the enemy while me and the rest get to Red and Blue team's position to see what the fuck is going on!"

"Or," Haggard said, inputting his more complex thoughts, breaking the flow of Mitchel's words. "We could just set a couple of explosives on their position, toss a happy ball over our heads and watch a damn nice fireworks show."

Mitchel looked confused as his mind stumbled upon the words, 'happy ball'. As Haggard hopped over the cover, not even acknowledging Mitchel's next response, dodging Promethean sniper shots as Sweetwater and Redford now provided covering fire. Marlowe followed as he slung his battle rifle and un-holstered his magnum for better movement.

As the Prometheans turned their attention to the covering fire, Haggard and Marlowe were able to army crawl as small arms fire passed over their heads. Finally, the two Marines were left immobile as they realized that all fire suddenly turned them to attention.

"That wasn't a smart idea!" Sweetwater yelled from his position, still laying siege with every bullet of his SAW.

"Alright, this could be worse!" Haggard said, as he looked from cover and suddenly ducked as a Promethean cloud trail raced by his head. "Noâ€¦ no, I BLAME YOU SWEETWATER!" Haggard yelled with all his might.

And in response Sweetwater waved one hand in defense and continued firing, finally destroying the first bad guy of the day as the flying clock hit the grass of the Alien-made planet.

Mitchel sprinted from cover, and in mid-step his rifle fired,

eliminating a shield on one of the Promethean Knights. He ducked down in a flanking position behind another Forerunner jolt structure.

The Knight let out an animalistic scream as it raced much faster than Mitchel and morphed into streaks of blue and white light forming into a small ball in mid-air and disappearing without trace.

That same ball appeared in front of Marlowe, with the Knight jumping from nothing on top of their cover. In a panic, Marlowe quickly wasted the ammunition of his Magnum, with each shell but one missing its intended target. Haggard pulled one of his custom grenade pins with a smiley face, and tossed the grenade at the Promethean.

Marlowe realized what the hell just happened and grabbed Haggard by his collar as the grenade exploded within the Promethean, causing the Knight's body to dissolve in an orange light seemingly made of pure lava.

"Haggard, you fucking idiot!" Marlowe yelled as the grenade explosion pushed both of them slightly back. He pulled Haggard back into a rock providing a decent position against the last Knight.

"What? That's at least one problem solved."

****Enemy controlled territory, Requiem, 2557 Military Calendar, 16:41****

"Negative, Blue and Red team have 'gone completely dark." Sweetwater announced as he got off the comm. link after an argument from two people in Red team named Griff and Simons of why they weren't there to provide sniper support for B-Company.

"God, what a shocker," Marlowe replied, as he and Mitchel burst out of cover to make sure the next hallway was clear.

Weirdly, after their first engagement, not a single peep of hostilities showed up in their view or radar. Minutes of walking through extensive hallways of impressive architecture and hardlight pathways lead them closer to the target.

Beautiful, dark blue lights lit every pore on their faces and every crescent of the hallways, as the light darkened upon a floor that floated in the middle of a smooth-bore, alien made cavern running endless as the bottom wasn't visible from their position.

As they approached a small terminal controlling the passageway of light, touched by Human hands as Sweetwater laid his pack on the ground, slung his SAW and simultaneously tapped a small computer as he balanced to lay it on his knee, and used his right hand to begin typing God knows what on the terminal.

Mitchel slowly paced back and forth as he looked with Haggard across the impressive cavern. Redford looked down the hall they came to make sure they situation remained the quiet pace it already took course to.

Marlowe leaned his back on an imaginary wall, and took out a cigarette from his vest pocket. As he scrambled to find a lighter or match.

"You ever hear those things are bad for you?" Mitchel commented as his feet still kept forward.

"The fuck are you, a liberal? Keep it quiet, you muffin headed, health-controlling freak," Haggard hissed, seemingly angering Mitchell more with Haggard's defiance.

And again before Mitchel could reply, Sweetwater finished, making a fist in the air and yelling: "Huzzah!"

The terminal faded and a blue light stretched from their position on the bridge to the floating island. Static electricity flicked within the shield pathway as in groups of two, the unit cautiously and quickly walked across.

Finally the unit made it to the floating island, as the main structure was a small hut-like building made of the same materials as everything else.

The hut was formed of sharp triangular pieces, edging mostly in the ceiling regions. The triangles meet in the center forming an obvious door.

"Now what?" Haggard bluntly asked, interrupted the stand-still silence.

"We just wait here and have a picnic— what the fuck do you think? I'm reading the I.F.F tags on the other side, we're opening this whore up," Redford ordered as he looked around for a terminal.

Others started to do the same thing as Mitchel tried to give orders. And, when no one listened, he opted to give up and assist in the search.

Marlowe still stood looking at the door with an unlit cigarette in his mouth. In annoyance and impatience, he kicked the center of the meeting triangles with his foot, causing a slight groaning and slow unfolding of the triangles, dragging all five's attention.

"Oh no, _makes total fucking sense_, the most advanced race in galactic history! And they have a seemingly _heavily armed door opened with a fucking boot_!" Sweetwater yelled in sarcasm as he glared at the doorway.

And in endless ages, the door stopped, finishing its opening process, leading to complete darkness as a rough and old voice spoke from within.

"You need a light, son?" it asked. It was gruff and commandeering, readying itself to jump at any moment.

Marlowe stood in partial shock of the Human voice speaking in perfect English; he nodded his head with his cigarette about to fall from his lips.

Out stepped from the darkness was a man dressed in the light yet bulky Marine combat uniform of the Great War. He had a main chest plate modeled after the ODSs and green painted, heavy shoulder pads

under a black, shock vest. His light-green camouflaged pants were faded and his black boots were untied and worn out.

His light brown face bore a black mustache and a newly bruised right eye with scars and fresh blood stains and cuts checkered his cheeks and mouth. His black hair was balding and his mouth formed a very mean yet friendly grin. Within the whites of his eyes showed complete insanity of the jarheads.

Upon his chest read a name tag.

Sgt. Major Johnson.

He reached into his side pockets and pulled out a lighter, and brought it near Marlowe's end of the cigarette, as Marlowe and the rest of the unit stood in confusion.

He flicked the small circular wheel a few times until a yellow flame burst to life from the cap and heated up Marlowe's cigarette.

"Son, I suggest you try cigarsâ€¦|'way better than this shit."

15. Endings

I'm sorry...but this is going to be the last chapter for the series...I can't keep up anymore. I'm getting more and more busy...this is going to be the last one for a 'very' long time...Well not really, I barely have any time to work on original works.

So this is it, I hope you enjoy

I'm fucking with you. I have no outside life. So I hope you all enjoy this chapter. Also, I started a Attack on Titan (Shengi...whatever the hell) X Halo so...if you want to check that out...yeah...Read it you bastards...****

WHICH ALSO MEANS I'M GOING TO STILL UPDATE THIS STORY BUT SOME PEOPLE IN THE REVIEW DIDN'T SEE THE DOZENS OF TIMES THAT SAID I WAS JOKING .

I also apologize because...yeah...this chapter is...short...

Hey! It's March 4th...only nine more days until the anniversary! (And I promise to post a huge chapter)

Aboard UNSC **_Infinity**_**, bridge, 2557 Military Calendar, 16:43**

Lasky hastily pulled out his magnum and unclicked the safety, carefully aiming it at the head of the leader. So did his peers as each man or woman pulled out their magnums with the few Marine guards raising their M45Ds.

The Xeno soldiers rushed the Marines, using their swords to slice through the soldiers before they could get a shoot off. One of the men tried to aim his weapon. The marine fired a shot. A small group of pellets bounced off the Xeno's shields. All Marines lay dead within seconds while the lightly armed _Infinity_ crew fired their

magnums.

Lasky did the smart thing.

He ordered Roland to cut off all communications and wipe the bridge terminals, and inform any available security personal ASAP.

Lasky looked back up, and raised his magnum, observing the Xenos ninjas subduing the crew members instead of leaving them as carcasses like the Marines. He unloaded his clip at the leader. He waved a hand, creating a bubble that sparked a dark blue every time a bullet bounced off.

One of the Xenos got near Lasky, causing Tom to turn and aim his pistol, pulling the trigger and hearing the hell of the empty click.

The Xeno knocked Lasky's weapon away and grabbed his neck, placing a sword only a few inches away from his artery.

The quick combat left the room riddled with bullets and the dead body of soldiers. The leader walked forward, his human skin visible on his face as it turned into a angry frown. He quickly tapped into the holo-table, moving empty screens like he was a master at it. But no information as the little there was turned into ones and zeroes, disappearing.

"Open this terminal now!" The man ordered, raising his sword as his goggles blared white. His voice was mysterious without emotion, and he seemed to be calm as air slowly entered the man's lungs.

"Under Cole Protocol, I am ordered to maintain the secrecy and classification of all sensitive military data." Lasky said, keeping calm and hoping that UNSC reinforcements will arrive soon.

The other human hostiles took the other crew and forced them on their knees, holding swords to their necks.

"Reactivate the terminal, or else!" He yelled, grabbing one of the kneeling crew members as she struggled under his grip. She looked to Lasky for help with her electric, blue eyes as her hair wavered. Her breathing was rapid, and her feet kicked in dismay. She was young, one of those soldiers who joined after the war. Her tag read Warrant Officer Franziska Loil.

"Even if you get in those terminals, the UNSC will be able to track any information you obtain." Lasky pleaded, trying to save this girl's life

"That doesn't seem to be true!" He said, as he tried again in failure to access the terminal.

Loil tried to lift herself up, but was forcefully pushed down by the human.

Lasky breathed and calmed himself, shaking a little; he whispered something under his breath for no one else to hear, blocking out the panic of sudden cries from the Warrant Officer: "Thomas J. Lasky, Captain, United Nations Space Command _Infinity_, Service Number 98604-72690-TL." He looked down, as the bastard continued to yell

at Lasky to open the terminal. "â€|I will serve the UNSC and Humanity to my fullest extentâ€|I will sacrifice my life in order to make sure Cole Protocol is fully enforcedâ€|."

You always defied ordersâ€|why did you even sign up for this? Oh waitâ€|

"â€|I am a soldier for Humanityâ€|I will serve out my ordersâ€|"

You used to defy ordersâ€|it turned out better than anybody would expect.

Lasky looked to the holo-table, wondering if Roland and Contradiction can fight off a cyber-attackâ€|noâ€|no, fill out your duties. Everybody knows what they signed on forâ€|they would die before seeing Humanity conquered.

Contradiction and Roland will noticeâ€|

"Waâ€|wait." Lasky interrupted through the madness. "I'll activate the terminalâ€|"

The human hostile's figure relaxed a little, as he lowered his sword from the girl's neck.

He grabbed Lasky's collar and pushed him forward to the terminal. Looking upon the blank screens, maybe he can insert a subtle warningâ€|Roland could catch that.

Lasky began to open a new screen; he quickly put in his security clearances and opened up a UNSC database.

The human pushed Thomas out of the way, tapping on a orange holo-computer Lasky seen Shepard and Liara used.

Roland and Contradiction will catch itâ€|they're UNSC , they can catch itâ€|

It's going to be okayâ€|.

Lasky watched as a menu of the UNSC secured database appeared. The symbol of the black eagle stared upon the two in hostility as the human still typed on his orange data pad.

A small input code appeared on the menu as red lines and error messages started to appear.

****Access denied under United Nations Space Command ****Emergency Priority Order 098831A-1.****

****Fuck you- Love Contradiction.****

One of the hostile swordsmen guarding the door turned around and met a bloody end with a Shotgun as Commander Florence and a mixture of Marines and Spartan-IVs stormed the room.

The swordsmen were caught off guard as the Spartan-IVs quickly took most of them down before they could respond.

Captured crew members turned from hostages to soldiers of Humanity as Marines handed them weapons or crew's grabbed them from the dead. A hostile tried to raise her sword against a Spartan but was quickly body-slammed against the wall of the bridge. The Spartan had his elbow raised and broke the sword in half, and the force of the wall left her dead or unconscious as she fell forward.

The human leader looked around then quickly turned to Lasky.

The last thing he felt was his stomach being crushed and pierced by something very sharp. A sample of blood popped up in the back of his mouth. The sounds of bullets and a scream every once and a while seemed muffled. He stared at the human's blocked eyes as Lasky's knees became wobbly. A bead of sweat traveled down his face and something flew by his ear.

Thomas J. Lasky, Captain, United Nations Space Command Infinity, Service Number 98604-72690-TLâ€|

The human used both his hands and pulled something out of Lasky. Tom's visions started to blur while the UNSC continued fighting. He reached down and felt blood and a glob of Christ knows what. Tom kept his hands there to keep any contents from spilling out. More blood entered his mouth and he spat some out to keep his throat from clogging.

The human raised his sword up, but was stopped when a pellet of shotgun rounds hit him in the shoulder and chest, puncturing his shield and the balls entering parts of his skin.

The human staggered backwards, and he sprinted out of Lasky's vision.

â€|_I amâ€|a Human of the UNSCâ€|I have served with honorâ€|_

Blackness encroached as Lasky tried to fight it. His legs gave up and he fell backward to the floor. Feet covered in white armor and others in black, danced in the bridge with swords and guns. One of the pairs of boots tried to reach Lasky while fending off a pair of white.

Lasky didn't die for Cole Protocol. He didn't enter the gates of hell for Humanity. Thomas violated Cole Protocol in the end by letting the human access the database. Yes, the human was stopped, yet even so, Lasky had committed acts of treason.

In the end, he died for the humans of the Infinity. He died for that random crewmember so she can live on and maybe retire from this fight. She could start a family or choose not to. In the end, she could live on as a person.

Lasky was rolled over onto his back. Thomas couldn't respond or speak as Commander Florence yelled at him in a strange anger with his green eyes. A medic knelt right next to Mark and popped off the safety of a can of Biofoam. Commander Florence used his hands and Lasky could feel heavy amounts of pressure in his stomach.

Thomas Lasky closed his eyes.

The pain stopped. The pressure stopped. The muffled sounds stopped. His duty as an officer was halted.

****Aboard UNSC _Infinity_, unknown location, 2557 Military Calendar, 16:55****

Cortana sat on the 'floor' with her knees curled up in a ball. She stared out into the whiteness as she rocked back and forth.

Her hair was flung across her face and arms hugged her knees. She sighed whether in misery or anger was an unknown.

Contradiction appeared right next to her, standing with tiredness forming across his face and body. He too sighed and looked down at Cortana.

"You did it, didn't you?"

She ignored his question, and looked up to him as she held back tears. "How did Cerberus get inside the _Infinity_?"

He shrugged. "Council peace codes. They somehow hacked into the _Infinity_, why?"

Her face showed disgust. "Peace codes? From what I gathered from Cerberus, they don't have the ability to even break one of our firewallsâ€¦|You know thatâ€¦|How?"

He looked down at his feet while Cortana pressed forward. "You had something to do with this, didn't you? For some reasonâ€¦|you tricked me into corrupting and changing the data schemes aboard that ship."

"Iâ€¦|"

"Why!?" Cortana got up, and looked at the punk A.I as she was one inch away from destroying his internal core. "Is thisâ€¦|is this how you plan to get us out? By getting UNSC soldiers killed? Whatâ€¦|what the hell did this accomplish, you fucking bastard."

She was about to punch him, her knuckles balled up and blood draw from her hand from fingernails. Contradiction whispered something.

"Iâ€¦|didn't leak the dataâ€¦|"

"What?" She stopped for a moment and her fists loosened. Confusion came to her mind.

"You were the leakâ€¦|"

"I didn't tell you earlierâ€¦|because even I didn't know, and if I reported it then ONI and Lord Hood wouldâ€¦|" He looked back to Cortana. "â€¦|I knew from the beginning that these Xenoâ€¦|humans could hack into our systems. Roland on the other hand was going down the investigated trail of the wrong path and wouldn't escape it."

"Howâ€¦|.?" Her voice was shaky.

"I tracked down the Reaper base signal to Florence, thinking he could be the only suspect. There weren't any signs of activity, and the Reaper signal was being quelled.

"Finallyâ€¦I looked over your internal scans I hid from the UNSC."

"â€¦"

"The new core we installed in youâ€¦is a Reaper storage container. Somehow these Reapers were present at the time of Forerunner and ancient Humanity's rule, and they were here long before we or the Forerunners even existedâ€¦I analyzed your containerâ€¦andâ€¦existence of Gravemind conscious signals lapped, hidden in the baseâ€¦.

"Cortana, right now more memory and data is filling up that containerâ€¦If this continues thenâ€¦Sovereign will have control. And I'm sorry to say this, but he already can take over your back channels so leaks can be sent out here and there without your knowingâ€¦and stoppingâ€¦.

"I'm sorry, Cortanaâ€¦the only way to stop this is eitherâ€¦a complete memory wipeâ€¦and when I say 'complete', I mean everything. I'm trying to stop it right now, but I can only do so much. If I tell Roland or anybody else besides youâ€¦well you know. I'm taking with some _friends_ right now to find a alternative container router and advanced firewalls to get rid of the Reaper code signal. And so far there are no results.

"In reality this isn't your faultâ€¦it's mine and Roland's. We had to switch to code: 'Retro Retro' in order to save youâ€¦we knew the risks of doing this, but we couldn't imagine it like this."

Cortana didn't speak. She did a reanalysis of her internal core. No results, no infections, no leak trails, no hack attempts. She did this again and again with the same results.

Noâ€¦noâ€¦Sovereign can't be a part of meâ€¦pleaseâ€¦pleaseâ€¦

She tried a external scans of her connections and channels. Nothing.

Cortana looked down at her feet and swore she saw the face of her rampant mind like back up. It smiled at her pain and turned into the dark red and black of the Reapers.

She sat back down on the floor, unable to hold back the tears as the fled down her checks. Now she realized part of that Reaper was helping her scan the internal core.

Contradiction laid his hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry."

16. UPDATE NOTICE! TYPE IT THE F UP!

UPDATE UPDATE UPF*INGDATE: Wellâ€¦yeah I sort of promised you guys a big chapter on March 13****th****â€¦.and it's really way past

****Lord Razor:** Yes, good suggestion. I was thinking about that

to...but we'll see...**

CAPTAIN JASE S-412: Thank you for your **encouragement. And note: I NEVER DIE.**

Artemis-Ikana: Don't worry, I'll kill you last.

Dragonmaster1296: Those are some pretty badass suggestions. Also, aren't you the guy that keeps reviewing that I should have a MC/Tali romance? Oh, well...But I'll keep note of the other suggestions in the future.

Fer82: First off: Learn fucking sarcasm. Second off: Thank you for your support, and I did take note on your ideas on how the races need each other in this chapter...sort ofish. Third off: Oh, you don't like Contradiction or references? WELL, too bad.

**dghornick: Your second idea I already had in mine. Though, I wish I could bring back the Spirit of Fire, but there's already too much going on. And thank you for your suggestions on how to murder...ants...or was there some subtle things in there?
0-o**

Jonas Copperwire: Oh Prometheans? (Shrugs)

HolyKnight5: Okay...bye...

Fulliron: I have no idea what those two fleets are...I'll look them up and stuff...so...maybe?

Random ass Guest: That's...sure...

hylianodst: What do you mean by that? Like, they were there at the battle of Reach?

greivervgf: So in a way, combine techs? Did I get that right? Like, combine the Mass Effect and Halo tech into one? Hmm...well than...You might sort ofish like this chapter? Ish...

KotaNativ3: Yeah, I really am. You got a problem with that?

Zomvee: Yeah, but it has to correlate with the main two videogames...Christ knows, I already put enough references...

Siphon 117: Pretty simple. It might happen...ish...

dracologistmaster: Good suggestion, but I already stalled this meeting enough...I need to get it going if you know what I mean...

Hazzamo: Basically the UNSC kicks everyone's ass? Why the fuck not?

**henryxk: I'm not depressed...I'm seriously not. Because usually I'm so overexcited most of the time. I'm taking it that the Halo universe should help with the construction of the Crucible. That's a good

thought, but I already have something else in mind.**

saddas74: Ah, you mean the anime for Halo? Also, of course the Nova will be used, what the hell did you think this is? And for the anime, well...I might bring in the ghost...

lethalassistant: encounterments with the Flood...ha, ha, ha...Also, the fk is Prozac?**

corporallee90: Interesting little connection between the Halo and ME universe...But, to be honest: I rather keep the Illusive men to have a...better purpose...

Halo Star Wars X-over fan: Ah yes. A happy story in which everyone survives...indeed. Well, unfortunately I read some of John Green's books and I'm taking influence of...killing off...characters...maybe...Also, I haven't looked up the Nassus station but I'm going to do that and see if I can input it into the story...

Akz251: Thank you for the encouragement. The portal thing might be a bit far fetched. That, and most of the fanboys here would be pissed if I did that...

** : In recent events, that does sound decent, but I learned that this site hates OCs. Maybe for another fanfic?**

Aboard SMAC Station Moscow, Earth, Sol. System, 2557 Military Calendar, 21:45

"Sir, it's good to meet you." Detective Phelps said as he sat down at his desk.

The light of cities flared upon Earth as the planet entered the darkness of orbit. Even after the near destruction five years ago, Earth was again thriving to the legend it once was. Africa was slowly but surely on the verge of its return, and Cuba and the other decimated countries are already back to shape. Small artificial ceiling lights brightened the small, black room that made up Cole's office. His desk was a sea of papers and holo-computers. It was unusually of Cole to be this disorganized yet with the pileup of investigations of ONI's illegal actions, and the sudden case of a violation of Cole Protocol aboard the UNSC Infinity, he barely had time to take a breath.

Now, Phelps picked the shortest straw from the lot and had to introduce Johnson back into the living. Detective Bekowsky was sent to interrogate the members of the UEG and others if they were the ones to leak the data that caused the kamikaze ship to crash into the Infinity.

Johnson stood in front of Cole's desk with his hands behind his back. He was dressed in a new, green shirt with the symbol of the Marines stitched over his heart and a set of tan, camouflage pants covered his legs. His injuries were bandaged and he held a newly lit cigar in his mouth.

"I heard a lot of things changed in the past five years." Johnson said in his gruff and confident tone. He stared at Earth as the city of Moscow turned forward against the sun.

"Youâ€¦heard right. The war with the Covenant ended when you 'sacrificed your life' and Sierra-117 destroyed the Ark, wiping out the flood. Unfortunately, God decided we weren't punished enough and put us on two new warfronts.

"But with Forerunner advantages, the UNSC is winning on both of these fronts. Though, right now the UNSC is in a political fight in one of these frontsâ€¦" Cole sighed with disgust, and Lasky's influence on Lord Hood. "â€¦We can easily take them on and defeat them within months. Hell, we'll have dozens of new colonies under the UN banner to replace those lost in the war, but Lasky suggested otherwiseâ€¦.Maybe that'll change sinceâ€¦"

Cole stopped as Johnson pulled the cigar from his lips. He blew a ring of smoke into the room.

"Earthâ€¦It's been a long time hasn't it?"

"Yeahâ€¦Strangely, even with the effects of this war, Humanity is quickly rebuilding faster than our analysts theorized. We managed to get our economy back on track and gather a good surplus. Earth is rebuilding country after country. It'll only be a couple more years until its back to what it was.

"Our colonies are another story. They're worse for wearâ€¦HIGHCOM is worrying about a future overpopulation problem, butâ€¦"

"Son." Johnson interrupted. "I'll be honest, I don't give a damn. I'm sure I'll be informed of the situation later.

"I only have two questions: Where is Cortana? Where is the Master Chief?"

Cole nodded. "I seeâ€¦I understand. The Master Chief and Cortana are both on deployment in the Illium front, the one I was just talking about earlier. They're taking orders under Lord Hood andâ€¦" Cole grabbed a paper from his desk top. The paper held the list of casualties of the attack against the Infinity. It displayed names of replacements next to the dead and wounded. "â€¦Commander Jessica Reed."

Johnson nodded. "Are they alright?"

"Yes, but they both went through some dramatic experiences. Cortana is now a stickler in the scientific community; every one with a degree from Advanced A.I Theory to finger painting wants their hands on her. She's the only A.I in recorded history to survive rampancyâ€¦And as for the Chiefâ€¦"

Cole dropped the paper he was just holding and grabbed another. Thousands of words made up the Chief's physiological reports. It was written by Phelps himself and other ONI detectives (Now UNSC detectives) based on reports from the Chief, Captain Lasky, soldiers fighting alongside him, and other various sources of information. At the bottom held a theory from Cole on how the Master Chief might go rouge in his search for revival of Cortana. Cole questioned HIGHCOM's decision on sending him back to the front. Nowadays, Cole's opinion wasn't even aloud to second guess HIGHCOM. He was completely under their control, and they could throw him out the airlock on a

whim.

He rubbed the back of his head and presented the sheet to Avery.
"Johnsonâ€¦it's going to take a long time to explain it."

Johnson grunted and took the paper. He quickly read over it as Cole waited patiently. Avery's cigar almost touched the paper when he finally lowered the sheet and looked to Phelps.

"Soâ€¦"

"I know, sir. The only three people who know how to handle the Chief were you, Cortana, and Laskyâ€¦butâ€¦he might not be a help right now." Cole stood from his chair. "That's what I also want to question you about, Johnson. From all the reports, you were dead. You got shot by a Forerunner particle beam and your vitals stopped. And to make it more stupid, you were found dozens of lights years away on Requiem by a squad of Humanity's worst marines. It's complete bullshit if I have to be honest." Cole quietly laughed. "Do you know what happened, sir?"

"Son, the last thing I remembered was being shot by a Tea-drinking, dodge ball. It felt like seconds when those marines pulled me out. Speaking of those marines; what happened to the rest of my squad?"

Cole answered Johnson's question by tapping on a holo-computer and opening up a tracking roster. "Your buddy, Major Pete Stacker, is now leading the advance boarding guard for Lord Hood for political talks and aâ€¦agreement of a future alliance on this Xeno station called the 'Citadel'. Reynolds is now serving as head security chief for the Infinity. Lieutenant Dubbo is now serving with the ODSTs."

Johnson smiled. "Dubboâ€¦that cocky bastard is still aliveâ€¦God damn it." He looked back down to the paper and the smile faded. "John's starting to question orders?"

"Yes, sir. Unfortunately, the Chief is under UNSC authority. HIGHCOM still considers him a vital asset to Humanity. He's one of the last few Spartan-IIIs and the only one with the best ability to complete dangerous tasks that threaten Humanity itself. You read it in the report; the Chief, again, saved Earth by destroying the Didact."

Johnson took his cigar out of his mouth and flicked the ashes onto the floor at Cole's dismay. "I hope you know, detective, John already played his role for Humanity. It seems you already have enough heroes and technology to fend for yourselves."

"Sir, the UNSC thought we did. But only a few days ago, the Didact disproved that by ripping through our SMAC stations and our most powerful warships. It was only because of the Chief, we were able to stop it."

Johnson smiled as he placed the Cuban roll in his mouth and took a puff. "So I come back in five years and Humanity is technically still in the same shape?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but it seems that way."

"So, does this mean I still have a job?"

****Aboard UNSC **_**Infinity**_**, bridge, 2557 Military Calendar, 16:48****

****Five hours ago****

"Fucking Christ, he's still bleeding!" Commander Florence yelled as a Xeno bullet flew past him.

Mark ordered the medic to hurry up and insert the biofoam. The medic grabbed his helmet in panic and pulled the trigger to the fire extinguisher-like canister. The dirty, green foam poured into the red wound tattered with fabric. No movement or any sign came from Lasky but the partial stop of the bleeding when the wound was filled.

Mark gritted his teeth as some of the foam entered the cuts on his fingers, burning and seemingly clogging his veins.

"Is he stable!?" Mark yelled over the fighting.

"Negative, we can't move him to the medical centersâ€¦!"

"Why the fuck not, marine!?"

"He got a god-damn katana sword through his gut! If we try to move him, his stomach will fall through the hole in his back. Vital signs are dropping fastâ€¦I need plasma, immediately! I'll try to stable him the best I can!"

Lasky's face turned a pale white as he closed his eyes. Blood soaked his officer's uniform and his body was drenched in sweat. Something grabbed Florence's shoulder causing him to turn. His senses grasped onto the outer world with the realization that the fighting has ended.

A few marines and crewmembers lay dead and the bodies of hostile Xenos turned into black ash, just like the squids. Shells rolled across the floor as marines and Spartans helped make sure the crewmembers were alright. The walls were peppered across with holes from dark matter and lead weapons.

Another medic holding plasma fluid in one hand, grabbed Mark's shoulder forced him out of the way and leaned over Lasky's cold body. An armored doctor dressed in red and white sprinted with a stretcher and a marine supporting him. All crowded over and blocked the view of the shreds of Lasky. Every once and a while, an order ran through from the head doctor to place pressure here or provide some adrenaline shots to increase Lasky's heart rate.

Florence reached down and picked up the shotgun he dropped on the floor earlier. He gently moved the hand of a dead soldier that landed on the barrel of the gun. Florence placed the weapon on his magnetic back and stood there, useless.

Crewmembers rushed over to the holo-table to regain access to the rest of the Infinity and make sure the Xenos truly didn't gain access to the UNSC database. More medics rushed in and either collected dead bodies or help the wounded. Another figure walked into the room with

the same officer's uniform and rank as Florence.

Jessica Reed looked to Mark as he watched the medics try to revive Lasky.

"Commander Florence?" She said. "The human, hostile leader is still aboard the Infinity. We spotted him heading towards the crash site. I'm having the Master Chief and any other available Spartans intercept."

Florence nodded. Unlike him, Jessica knew what has to happen next. Lasky was either near death or already regrouping at the gates of hell. As officers, they still had the obligation to fulfill their duties. And Jessica did this without hesitation. She was now captain of Humanity's greatest ship for the moment. She couldn't waste any time on emotional hesitation.

The UNSC needed them to continue despite Lasky's wishes of breakage. For now, if he survived, Lasky might be declared a traitor for purposely trying to leak data to the enemy. This was unacceptable, even at the costs of Human lives. Humanity and Earth came first and needs to be defended at any cost. All precautions must be set and measures must be taken to the extreme.

Whether Lasky intended to or not, didn't matter at the moment. Commander Florence started to realize this. No focus should be placed on situations out of his control, and events that will take place in the future. At least for now, his mind had to be set on the course the present was taking. He looked to her with shaky hands and asked: "Where do you need me?"

"I informed Lord Hood on the situation and he requested that we stall the Citadel meeting till we at least get things cleared up. The main Xeno force has been defeated and we're now picking off any stragglers. I need you to watch all ground companies and make sure orders are followed through."

"Yes ma'am." His mind took one last jump to Lasky. "What about Captain Lasky?"

Jessica eyed him then looked back to Florence. "Commander, you can't focus on that for the moment. The medics and Infinity staff will try to take care of him."

Florence looked around and saw warrant officers begin to restore Infinity bridge systems. A girl with electric-blue eyes rushed over to the call of a superior and waited for orders.

Commander Florence walked to the holo-display and opened a new menu. He made sure connections were reactivating, and a diagram of the Infinity popped up. Small triangles represented Spartan and ground companies as they slowly pushed back the diminishing number of red arrows.

He made sure no anomalies were in set and all companies were complying. A blue arrow deep within the crash site represented the Master Chief and Spartan-IVs as they set to ambush the human leader. The enemy lines broke one by one as marine forces advanced to meet the super soldiers.

A medic yelled something about Lasky's spine, but Florence ignored it as he continued to follow Commander Reed's orders. She stormed out of the room followed by Spartan-IV guards to go about other important matters. Mark watched through the security cameras as Major Stacker led an assault on Xeno troops through the massive supply corridors of the ship. He saw the _Infinity_'s PDCs warm up in case of another attack, and to eliminate the human leader's ship if he somehow escapes the Spartan's trap.

Mark saw in the corner of his eye, men carefully raising Lasky onto the stretcher as blood poured under the body. One of the Medical Corps Officers held a bag of plasma fluid and a carefully set wire placed in Lasky's artery. The officer pushed on the bag to replace the blood loss from Lasky's wound.

Florence only continued to follow Reed's orders and moved a company to the upper corridors to help a fending Army platoon.

****Aboard UNSC **_**Salvation**_**, UNSC HIGHCOM Council, 2557
Military Calendar, 16:51****

"I can speak for the board that these humans are under control of the UNSC." General Shimazu stated as he crossed his arms. "This attack against the UNSC is a act of rebellion, and they should be treated like any other rebellion. Crushed and executed."

Lord Hood grunted at the headstrong leader. He turned to the other blue holograms as some nodded at the general's words while others stay put.

Hood received the report on Lasky's condition. If he were to live, he might not be able to serve again. His spinal cord was cut in half and he was losing blood fast. The Corpsmen reported that adrenaline shots were barely keeping the heart level above minimal levels. The hospitals aboard the _Infinity _are doing everything within its power to keep the captain alive.

Lasky was a major asset to Humanity. Despite his strong empathy, he was a tactical genius and a brilliant strategist in major campaigns. His performance during the Great War and the first battle of Requiem proved that Lasky was beyond the equivalence of admirals yet the predictability of his persona hampered a major flaw that could be easily exploited. That's way Lord Hood kept him under close watch, temperament to the perfection could become easy, especially out of sight. And from the hostage report, that's exactly what happened.

Reports confirm that Lasky purposely tried to give information to the enemy. Detectives looking for scapegoat also wanted to blame him for leaking the peace code for the _Infinity_. Yet Lord Hood knew this wasn't true, and the reason why Lasky leaked the other database entrances. Even so, through investigational law not even Lord Hood could defy, Lasky must be interrogated to truly make sure he wasn't the one to leak the peace codes.

Lord Hood went down a mental list of replacements incase Lasky didn't come back, which would be likely.

And without Lasky, Lord Hood's conscious was subsiding and agreeing with Shimazu's suggestion. Lasky was the only thing keeping the

greedy hands of the UNSC off the Systems Alliance and the other Xeno races. Even with this great loss of assets and personnel, the UNSC could move into control and subdue the rebels. Shepard's words didn't matter; all Humans were under control of the United Nations. Lord Hood began to create a priority list of worlds, beginning with the duel Earth and the System Alliance's colonies just in case.

Reed will have control of the _Infinity_ from here to the end of the meeting aboard the Citadel. After that, another Captain with more experience will take her place. Mark Florence was out of question. At the moment he could be a vital security risk and the other members of HIGHCOM won't agree to this. Captain Andrew 'Ender' Wigen of the 13th Disciple proves to be a fierce strategist yet he has a habit of distrustfulness towards HIGHCOM, and many of the admirals are afraid what the kid could truly do.

Hood's mental list expanded as Admiral Harper responded. "If I read Cortana's report correctlyâ€|these rouge Humans known as Cerberus are a small guerilla group. How should we track them down?"

"As we speak, the human leader is heading towards a trap set up by Commander Sarah Palmer and Sierra-117. Once he's capturedâ€|alive, preferably, then we can interrogate him for answers." General Holland said.

"And what about theseâ€|Reapers? Have we learned anything about these threats?" Strauss said.

"Our researchers have found both Forerunner A.I base code and Promethean signals lying in the core baseâ€|." Harper sighed. "â€|Our researchers also believe they found dozens of Flood telepathic signalsâ€|."

Lord Hood was removed from his lists and looked to the Admiral along with the rest of HIGHCOM.

"What do you mean, admiral?" Lord Hood asked.

Harper crossed his arms and eyed the other admirals in a sullen motion. He looked afraid. "Since we were allowed access to the construction files of the UNSC _Legend After_, one of our eggheads hypothesized the correlation between the Reaper's telepathic control ability and the Gravemind mind control. We cross-analyzed the signals and found some similarities. You could say the Gravemind signal was hijacked and taken over by the Reapers."

"Should we consider these Reapers a greater threat than they are?" Lord Hood asked. Every member of HIGHCOM waited for Harper's answer.

He stayed silent for a moment. "From everythingâ€|we gathered, the Reapers also take control of the dead. But unlike the Flood, the squids use a system of nanochips and synthetics. Luckily, this takes time and they must have certain conversion stations nearby. I simply suggest we recover our dead before they do.

"We were also able to analyze some of the dead Cerberus soldiers and concluded that these have been turned into a Reaper of some type. It's unknown if Cerberus is a specialized group of Reaper infiltrators or somehow used the means to control Reaper

technology."

"So why does this Reaper have Flood signals?"

"I can't say, sir, other than dozens of theories. The eggheads are still trying to analyze the alien codes, signals, and architecture within the Reapers.

"The eggs have also looked over the Catalyst, Citadel, and God's Key blueprints. Just like the Reapers, God's Key and the Catalyst have Forerunner base architecture and alien architecture. The Citadel is purely Forerunner, at this moment its purpose is unknown, but we think it could be a type of experimental shield world like Requiem or a specific director for the Halos."

"And how do you figure that?"

"The Citadel has energy relays and overlays that aren't built to handle Dark Matter, and can handle far more power than is required for the station. The power is directed toward the arms and the connections to the main ring of the station. We only assume its relation to the rings because of its late architecture date."

Lord Hood absorbed the information. He stayed silent for a moment and let the admirals' attention turn slowly towards him. He calmly announced to the board. "Even with HIGHCOM's majority, and even I, agreeing that this splinter group known as the Systems Alliance is under the authority of the UNSC, my orders shall continue on the set path. But I will make it clear to this Citadel Council that Earth is the United Nations top priority. Since Admiral Harper's division has taken over the ONI's research department, he'll continue to gather everything he can and report it to me. I will take the advice of the Elites and continue this Alliance to gather as much information as Harper needs to uncover the mystery of the Reapers, this unknown race, and the duel Earth. As much as you want to ignore it, we don't have the resources to open a new front especially with the underlying threat of the remaining Covenant. So only a few battle groups will remain here afterwards with the support of the Xeno alliance. Though I will assure every one of you that if Humanity is even subtly threatened or harassed by these Citadel species, I will use our military power to the fullest extent.

The admirals nodded in forced agreement as Hood continued. "Captain Thomas J. Lasky is...unavailable as you already know. His XO will take over for now and resume command over the Infinity until after the meeting. Yet Lasky was the only one who was able to get the Systems Alliance and the Council to trust us. We can't wait for him to heal if he even does. The only one near his persona would either be Captain Andrew Wiggen or Commander Mark Florence.

"Wiggen has a manner of manipulating people and gaining their trust, and he could prove to be a more valuable asset than Lasky. Commander Florence is now a fully fledged officer of the UNSC and will follow through with orders. I still believe he has enough sympathy to show the Council that the UNSC has some 'humanity'."

Hood looked to each general and admiral's face, daring anyone to question his decision. While some looked in disgust and disagreement, each kept their mouths shut with discipline.

"I've received B-Company's and Detective Phelps's report on the I.F.F tag recovery. How's Sergeant Major Johnson's condition?"

Strauss spoke up. "He mostly wanted to know about Sierra-117 and A.I Cortana's record in the past five years. He's jumping with anticipation to join the Illium Theater immediately."

"Granted. I'll personally see his squad assignment and position role. This meeting is adjourned."

â€|

"Contact!" One of the Spartans yelled as each armored figure rose from their positions and hands tightened around the triggers to different types of rifles.

The Master Chief stood with his brethren and aimed his sights at the single target. He sprinted down the other corridor, and the Chief pursued with the five other Spartan-IVs.

"This is A.I Cortana to all other personal: Target is on the move and is heading downâ€|corridor 8-1-4. Stand by, target is considered extremely dangerous; try to take him alive, boys."

Her voice ringed through John's ears and the rest of the Spartan groups. One by one the super-soldiers turned down the hall and were cutting distance from the slower human.

The human looked back for a second and threw a small ball at the Spartan group. His head turned back and increased speed to the infinite corridor. His black overcoat bounced with every step and his swords moved with it.

A explosion eradicated onto the group. Fire engulfed the Chief's vision for only a second and his shields took major damage indicated by the bar as it lowered and lowered itself.

From the smoke arisen Humanity's saviors as their armor glistened from ash and smoke, and shields brightened to view of a spark, yellow light. Some tucked in their heads and arms caroused and rocked their rifles.

The Chief's helmet shook with every step and the figure come closer into view. John's ammo counter displayed the perfect thirty-two rounds of his MA5B. His shields halted at their depletion and armor corroded upon the flares of the grenade.

"Target is in sight, standing by." A female voice said through the squad comms.

The Spartans shortened the distance until the human turned down another corner, and meet a barricade stationed with six Spartan-IVs and three very familiar Spartan-IIs.

The human quickly slide to the left as a premeditated sniper round broke through his bubble shield and left him near stumbling onto the ground.

The Spartans caught up to him as he turned his head to each rifle aimed and ready to fire at any part of his body.

Seeing no way out, the human slowly keeled on the floor, and raised his hands into the air. No emotion wiped through his face or any sign of fear or defeat. But a strange hatred glowed through his goggles.

****Aboard UNSC Infinity, bridge, 2557 Military Calendar, 09:53****

****Two days later****

"They're taking a moment to respond." Roland announced as he and Contradiction continued to move holo-screens, and typing in numbers and codes. Both stood on the holo-table and faced opposite of each other. Only cooperating to sign off a screen or scan each other's work.

Commander Reed looked upon the massive structure known as the 'Citadel'. As it laid still in the midst of purple clouds and a coming source of white light shining through the clouds, scenting the room with its beautiful glow.

In short, this thing was the majesty on their side of the galaxy. Ships encircled it like a marvelous planet and quiet yet enriched chatter brushed the sensors of the radio. This truly was a center of politics and culture in its own strange way.

Dozens of Xeno ships backed away from the _Infinity_, and the _Shadow of Intent_ whether in fear or to break a future tenseness. A few UNSC frigates moved forward and scouted ahead peacefully. All weapons were on lock down, and shields were raised to the max with all backups on standby so and crews could get time to reactivate all resources in case the Xenos try something.

Commander Florence paced along, staring upon the prints of the Citadel on the holo-table. A tried look set in his eyes as he took a deep breath and spoke. "The 501st Assault is ready on standby, Buck and his ODSs are ready for security duties, all Spartans are ready for further orders. I believe Lord Hood and Captain Wigen are ready for departure so I better get down there in a moment. And all Infinity's weapons are shut down including the MACs, but I made sure that the slugs are ready for loading in a moment's notice."

"Good work." Reed quietly responded, as she stared upon the Citadel, reminding her of the old Star Wars movies. "Jesus Christ looks a little like Coursant, you know like a giant city planet."

"Oh, you saw the Star Wars movies?"

"Yup, all fifteen including the three bad ones."

Reed turned and opened up a new screen upon the table, making sure all measurements were in place. She sighed, a little embarrassed of her precautions upon a simple yet important task: Watch over Humanity's greatest warship while her master is deployed for a diplomatic meeting for a bunch of Xenos, and make sure Florence doesn't do anything stupid. In reality, Lord Hood and the rest of the board ran the show while she played an expectance of pawn. Roland quietly passed her a screen of a baker's dozen of Pelicans launching

to meet up with Covenant transports.

"This is Citadel Flight Control to United Nations Space Command _Infinity_, we copy, over. We designated a hanger for your transports to land; our security ships will make sure you get there safely." A women's voice broadcasted over the loudspeaker.

"Rodger, five transports will land in your hanger." With that, Reed cut the line and turned to Florence. "Troop deployments look in check?"

"Yes ma'am. Major Stacker, Lieutenant Dubbo, Buck and their boys will land first. The Shipmaster and the Arbiter will land second with Elite Royal Guards and Hunter groups. And finally Wiggen, Lord Hood, and I, with theâ€¦" Mark pulled out a database and read it over. "Master Chief, Blue Teamâ€¦Christ, all of these are the remaining Spartan-IIs and IIIs."

"That's good." Reed said in a relaxed manner, lowering her shoulder and her mind. She had to remind the rest of her body that things are going smoothly as planned. "Roland, move the _Infinity _to a defensive position."

"Aye, aye commander." Roland responded.

"Ohâ€¦I thought you guys should know something." Contradiction interrupted. "Ah, good ol' English is spoken everywhere, and it's basically filled with all the bullshit of old Earth. It's all nice on the outside but in reality, their trying to keep everybody from killing each other and declaring crusades for cultures and/or religions. I suggest you keep any personal beliefs to yourselves, and try to hide the soldiers' religious necklaces, and keep the deacons aboard the ships. Oh, and the Asari are a interesting sort. Apparently they're a all-female race and reproduce with any other race without horrible genetic mutations. Not sure if that's sexy or disturbing, or sexy that it is disturbingâ€¦I'll let you take the pick."

"â€¦Good to know Contradiction." Mark answered with distaste. "So what are your orders now, Commander?"

"Stand by for now, we're useless until this meeting's over or the Xenos try to bite us. We'll maintain communications to the rest of the UN board."

Mark nodded, continuing to look over screen after screen as Contradiction eyed him.

"Did you get any word on how we're going to deal with that human?" Florence asked to the A.I.

"All I was told that the human was handed over to the UN Investigations Department."

****Citadel hanger, 2186 Citadel Calendar, 10:00****

Shepard and Liara stood in front of the barriers holding back the crowds of people, as news reporters pushed pass each other, trying to get a shoot and yelling over each other. People gathered to see the mythic force, talking and sometimes yelling. Dozens of Citadel

Security Personnel patrolled the borders with Avenger rifles and security cars parked along the barriers or flew around the hanger.

The barriers were moved in a T. With the top of the letter formed at the beginning of the platform looking out through the blue, oxygen field into the spokes of the Citadel and space beyond. The base lead to a group of transport cars, readying to take them to the Citadel Council.

Lights of the security cars illuminated Liara's blue features as she stood with her hands folded behind her back, breathing slowly, trying to calm herself. Her chest expanded with air and she refolded her white jacket. Her dark, blue freckles pattered her cheek bones and her eyes closed for a second.

"You seem tense." Shepard commented, as he folded his hands.

"It doesn't really differ from my usually moodâ€¦you could say I'm a little on edge since the UNSC brought a lot more ships than I expected." Liara said.

"Did you promise Tali to try and get any ship data?" Shepard asked, changing the subject.

"No, but I'm pretty sure she's still expecting either you or me to retrieve any information. The problem is that if we do get any information somehow, she'll be stuck alone in her room for the rest of her life." She said, smiling as if she actually thought up of the situation.

"Don't forget, she has to come out sometimes." A sarcastic voice said behind the two of them, causing both to turn around to find the large and scarred face of a old friend.

Garrus walked over to the two, his armor shifting with his legs and arms. "Got bored, decided to come down here and take a look at theseâ€¦_legends_."

Liara smiled, looking back and forth from the shield to Garrus. "You wouldn't miss much; they aren't the most interesting 'species'."

"I'll decide that for myselfâ€¦by the way, I got a message from Wrex, he said: 'Shepard, make sure you let these bastards know that the Krogans can kick their asses any day of the week.'"

Shepard grunted. "I'll try my bestâ€¦speaking of which."

All three looked with the crowd upon the void as three transports came closer to view. Each one was the same built as the transport the Normandy followed through Nos Astras. Except these shuttles looked different with a smaller build, its cockpit built wider, the wings clipped short, and a cut landing base.

One by one these transports entered the shield into the hanger, positioning itself for room. They gently floated to the ground, kicking the small amounts of dust that developed over the floor. The ships spun around, its four wings turning in different directions to accompany it.

Security teams, purposely made of all Humans and some Asari, slowly approached the door, weapons holstered and hands raised to block the dust.

Once the transports touched down, two slits opened, revealing groups of armed soldiers dressed in green with bandanas, goggles, and helmets. And segregated from this unit was another group that held the slick, black armor and bore the thin visor of their helmets.

Cameras roared with lights and sensors as the groups marched through and meet the Security Forces. Each weapon was lowered, but the soldiers tensed. Their armor shifted, and faces looked anxiously to each individual member of the crowd. Slowly, fingers were placed on the trigger, only stopped by safeties and conscious thought.

Covering these deep underlays were the prestige and unity of a military force. With each man or woman looking confident, and ignoring each person. The backs of each soldier stood straight and each walked and guarded their unit with years of training. Some soldiers lay in a polite gaze at Alien races, whether to the Asari and their Humanlike features, or to the Salarains and their black eyes.

The unit stopped in front of Shepard and his group while news reporters continued to shove their microphones and cameras, yelling questions.

"Are you really humans?"

"Will your groups join under a Systems Alliance flag?"

"Has the Xeno refugees been released?"

"Are you going to stay and help fight the Reaper threat?"

One of the green armored soldiers walked to Shepard, yelling in a Southern accent over the questions and yells from the crowds.

"Commander Shepard? I'm Major Marcus Stacker, Second Battalion, Fifth Marines. We're here as a vanguard to make sure this area is secure and ready for our superiors' arrival."

"Colonel, good to have you here." Shepard greeted in kindness, reaching his hand out for Marcus to shake. His hand quickly rose out and grabbed Shepard's hand, seemingly causing more cameras to roar and the crowd yelling in excitement. "Sir, if you can follow me."

Marcus nodded, looking to the rest of his men. "Lieutenant Dubbo, you and your platoon guard this hanger. I want two Pelicans to pull out and one on standby here. Platoon three, standby and wait for Colonel Buck to arrive to receive further orders. Platoon two—guard the barriers, make sure none of those damn news reporters get over it."

One of the soldiers dressed in green looked to the crowd, raising his arms like a fan at a game, and jumping up and down. He stopped as fast as he started when one of his superiors walked by. Others calmly

walked to a solely picked position. Another soldier taunted the reporters by walking right up to the barrier and looked passed them, ignoring each question thrown at him.

Two out of the three pelicans backed up through the shields out into the void. Leaving one transport present to form a makeshift basecamp as soldiers walked in and out of it.

Before Shepard could begin a new conversation, two more transports broke through. This time, one of them was the pink and purple design of a alien transport. It's shiny and curved armor attracting the attention of the crowd.

While the UNSC transport calmly landed, the other raced in a rush, raising up and suddenly leveling itself. A white light shone through a hole, with small static rippling the area. And what dropped through it wasâ€¦|.

These things stood at ten feet tall, decorated in blue heavy armor and a giant, metal shield. Its skin was a mesh of orange and red, divided into strips and moving in cohesion, acting like the muscles. The two green, snake eyes bored its vision upon everything in a hostile matter as. It swung a giant cannon made of a sliver colored metal, and a green liquid warmed up for anyone who would threaten it. What followed were the freighting, orange armor of the Shangheili, and the pathetic pattering of the three-foot tall alien soldier. Hoping around with some on all fours, each holding a small, green pistol, and triangle like armor sprouting from their backs colored either red or dark yellow. Two more aliens came through, baring the face of the Shipmaster and the Arbiter.

All the cameras ignored the UNSC and focused on the new life forms, reporting upon the confusion and empathy on how the council should respond to the new race. Pure shock rung only kept together that these were the allies of the UN.

The other transport only produced two more black armored troopers. Both walked to Shepard, his group, and Stacker. Trailing the black armored troops was the Arbiter and a ten-foot tall monstrosity.

"Major Stacker." One of the soldiers greeted. As Shepard observed closer, he noticed that Stacker and the other held the same tagging of the two that arrested or 'attacked' al-Jilani in that video.

"Colonel Buck, sir! I'm readying the squads for further security services as we speak." Stacker reported.

The colonel nodded in approval, his face looking to Shepard and his crew. "Good work. I'll personal launch with the security teams. You stay here and greet Lord Hood and Captain Ender when they arrive."

"Yes, sir!" Stacker yelled. The colonel turned to Shepard as he began to walk towards the transport vehicles.

"Commander Shepard?" He began. "I'm Colonel Edward Buck of the 4th ODS. I've been told that you'll be theâ€¦|moderator between our few groups?"

"Yes sir. The Council is ready for your superiors' arrival and we cleared the streets to make sure no civilians or any other hostile threats are present. I'm sorry, but the Council did ask for only three guards to be present at this public meeting."

"Denied. We'll have as many guards as needed to insure the safety of Lord Hood and the other representatives. A squad of handpicked men, a Spartan combat team, and a detachment of Elite Royal Guards will be attending."

At a cue, seven black armored men followed Shepard and Colonel Buck. A majority turned their gaze to Garrus and Liara as they walked side by side. One of the soldiers held a heavy sniper rifle seemingly built to pierce the armor of tanks.

Shepard sighed, trying to rummage his mind. "I understand, sir. But is it necessary to bring that amount of security?"

"Probably not, but we're the cautious sort. I will fulfill these orders if force need be." The colonel glared at Shepard, daring him to respond with anything that differed.

There's no convincing this man. So Shepard told him that it'll be fine yet he made sure Colonel Buck understand that the Council will have a large amount of Security personnel for their own safety.

Buck nodded and Shepard guided the group to the cars.

â€|

"All teams are green, sir." Commander Florence reported as he followed Lord Hood and Captain Wiggen.

All three wore the traditional, white naval uniform and cap of the UNSC Navy. Mark unconsciously laid his hands on his holstered magnum at every second. In the depths of his mind was the strange and possibly unnecessary fear of a incoming tide from these Xenos. The UNSC was far superior in every way, but now they gave up their armored hulls and super weapons to bare equality in a room filled with desperate strangers.

Of course, from everything that was retained from Shepard and all other reports; there shouldn't be a single reason these Xenos would piss them off. All these people were ready to create a new religion of Humanity in order for survival from the squid threat.

But Florence sighed at the apparent unheeding and passive-aggressive ways of this Citadel Council. These were politicians thinking they were doing the best for their people. These were the old leaders of Earth who were only voted into office by lies, and ignorance of the people. Unfortunately, what their common citizens understand couldn't seep through their heads. Yielding power, and a ongoing way of superiority and pride was a conscious decision of dooming survival. A decision to save their families and anybody else they ever loved or hated.

Yetâ€|with Lasky'sâ€|absence, that survival may become exclusive to Humanity. It was unknown how Lord Hood would sustain forward for any plans. For the moment, he would maintain this fragile and false

dependency. Only keep it until the Reaper threat is somehow extinguish and try to leave the Xenos as crippled as possible for a easy UNSC taking.

Or maybe worse—and maybe if he was smart; he wouldn't have to fight on a single world for a inch of Xeno territory. These people were ready to believe and do anything...debt and compromise is a natural law in sentient life.

Maybe the Council realized this to. The quiet transfer of power from a terrible god to a even worse one. A slow meaning of eradication of Xenos, and the installation of dozens of unneeded UNSC colonies for Humanity without the Xenos' realization. And now, if Lord Hood stays empathetic to their questions and wills, the Council will have some say and manipulation, but only as far as the UNSC will tolerate.

As intelligent these admirals and generals were, very little had any slight experience in politics. This could either give them a edge or dive into a cliff since UNSC leaders suppressed the law of compromise in order to serve Humanity.

Mark prayed that Lasky still had some lasting effect on Hood.

If Captian Wiggen was anything Florence thought to be, then Wiggen will also come to the same conclusion and do his best to steer the UNSC from the final verdict.

Yet despite Florence's conscious and Lasky's words. When the hammer cannot be drawn, Mark will follow the direct orders to take over Xeno worlds or eradicate all hostile threats if they dare threaten to turn down the bargains given by Humanity. But before that could become a reality, Lord Hood will let Wiggen and Florence take the reins at this meeting. So...a brighter day has better chance of persevering.

But Mark's conscious was always tainted by a single thought that probably justified his means for following HIGHCOM's orders when they come down to it. A thought that denied his will to even stop the hammer.

What made these Xenos above Humanity? Humanity always comes first in matters of resources and pure survival. Throughout recent events and history, this has been proven over and over again. These Xenos obviously had families and live, but that doesn't make it as equal or more important to the lives of Humanity under the UNSC. Dozens of colonies were lost in the Great War, and now, possible hundreds of new worlds were ready for the stations of Humanity.

Lord Hood nodded as he led the two to a Pelican readying to jump the deck. The cargo door held way to eight-foot giants of the five Spartan-IIs. All of them held MA5B rifles and shotguns. Their helmets locked in unison, staring across the pathway to either a empty seat or to one of their brothers.

The maintenance crews and security stepped back and saluted the admiral. One voice yelled for admiral on deck as Lord Hood stepped onto the Pelican. Florence and Wiggen followed and took a seat.

Florence found himself sitting to the Master Chief. The Chief stayed

silent and continued to stare straight forward. The only time he ever acknowledged the outside world was one Lord Hood nodded to him and he nodded back.

Wiggen sat next to Florence while Hood sat on the opposite side. In a moment, the doors of the shuttle closed and the hiss of vacuum encompassed their ears.

A sense of vertigo crept into their senses when the Pelican lifted from the ground into the air. This sense halted when the Pelican exited the hanger into space.

"Are any of the Xeno civilians proving hostile?" Hood asked. He took out a data-pad and began to insert orders and receive various codes of information.

Mark spoke. "Negative, they're like any other crowd: The police have to hold them back and prevent them from trampling each other like wild animals. Colonel Buck and his squad are making sure the Council room is secured and ready for our arrival, sir."

Hood nodded and thus left the cargo hanger in silence.

The Pelican rocked when the shuttle passed through the entrance of the five spokes surrounded by dozens of Xeno ships. Through the small viewing hole; in the distance, the UNSC Infinity and the Shadow of Intent stood motionless and preyed watch to any movement of aggression. Above, a UNSC Marathon cruiser seemed to move forward with the Pelican. And when Mark's eyes turned to a Xeno ship on standby next to the cruiser, he looked upon a pathetic majesty of an odd, but beautiful ship.

Its blue ring broke the bright, fading white light of the enigma that lay in space. The ship held four wings, each spanning out on different sides. It curved and smoothed until it met in the center to a built formation of a empty oval, forming a star-like shape. The ship spanned over the Marathon Cruiser like an owner to his dog.

"ETA: two minutes until arrival. Internal readings confirm of breathable, artificial atmosphere with around the same gas levels and balances as Earth." A pilot reported on the intercom.

At the pilot's voice, a Phantom skidded by the Pelican and continued to fly in the void back to its mother.

Their Pelican banked left, and the smaller engines of the older D77H-TCI Pelican cooled off and their yellow lights faded.

A rumble of gravitational pull breached the Pelican's way of flight. The ship passed what looked to be walkways surrounded only by a blue bubble. People on these walkways turned their heads and stared at the simple ship when it gated through a cramped hanger door and into the hangar.

The Pelican twisted and the engines pointed in the opposite directions to present its cargo hold to the hanger filled with hundreds of people below.

The Spartans stood from their set and readied their weapons like it

was a combat deployment. Their bodies blocked the view of the hangar when the doors opened. Mark, Ender, and Lord Hood got up one by one. Each followed the Spartans as all of them dropped onto the steel of the floor in groups.

Flares of cameras, and yells of questions, and other things that were hard to extract, bloated the room and Mark's eyes and ears. His feet propped down from the Pelican to the Xeno hangar. He turned around to make sure Lord Hood and Captain Wiggen got out alright.

He twisted his head and found barriers lined up. Reporters crowded against them like people at a concert. Groups of Marines, Covenant Cells, and Xeno forces maintained the wall while keeping separate. Cameras turned to whatever direction, whether at the recently deployed Spartans and UN Commanders, or the Covenant splinters. The Spartans moved forward with caution and weapons raised. A small squad of a Xeno-like security force made up of Humans and...Asari, was it? Whatever the name, each Spartan-II towered over the pathetic looking police force.

Lord Hood walked forward while Mark and Wiggen trailed behind. Hood held his hands behind his back and approached the leader of the Xeno group. The admiral stood straight and gazed upon the massive yet somehow crowded hangar with a glare showing his little impressment.

"Admiral, sir!" The Xeno squad leader announced. The man saluted the admiral and stood at attention, and so followed the rest. Their uniforms seemed like causal clothing. Legs were covered by black boots, and pants that connected to a sleeveless vest. Under this padded vest was a white, jersey-like T-Shirt. "I'm Commander Bailey with Citadel Security. Commander Shepard and the rest of the Council are waiting for you."

"Our security forces are up there?" Lord Hood asked.

"Yes, sir. If you will follow me?" Without a response, Commander Bailey and the rest of his squad walked down the crowded hall in a disorganized fashion.

Lord Hood walked in the company of the Spartans. Four stood at his side while the Master Chief took the front. Mark and Wiggen followed without the guards of Spartans or any soldiers. Their eyes darted from person to person in the crowd. Weirdly as much of a augmented despise a common soldier of the UNSC has dawned up; this society seemed civil, or at least acted very close to the people of the UNSC.

There was not a single thought or action differing from the mind of a human. And in retrospect, neither a single species differed in conscious thought, or had the contrasted version of a animal kingdom on Earth. The Covenant banded together in zealousness for the name of a religion like Humans have done hundreds of times before until the mid-22nd century. And here, Xenos banded together in a political cause just like Humanity has done until the full establishment of the UEG and the UNSC. In a strange correlation of evolution, whether intended by God or he was just lazy, didn't differ of the abstracts in the Citadel. The Asari looked like humans tinted blue and tentacles tapped onto their heads (That, and they were all females. The marines are going to have a hell of a time if they get over the

tentacles). The Salarians looked like lizards, and the Turians had relationships to birds.

If Mark was informed correctly, only a small number of species had quarters at the Citadel. And thankfully, no bonds showed in a formation similar to the Covenant. It really was like Contradiction had said: They all hated each other and only pretended to get along just like the histories of the old nations of Earth.

They got closer to a small landing platform and three blue vehicles painted with a symbol of two, steep crescent arcs separated by a thin line before they meet. Under this symbol was the letters C-SEC written in English. On top, sirens flared in bright red and blue like a police car.

"If you will step into the car, admiral." Commander Bailey said as he pointed to the one in the middle.

â€|

"It's not going to end well, watch." Romeo commented as he leaned on a invisible wall and shouldered his sniper rifle.

The hall of the Council room glowed a bright, red light that gave the scene an eerie yet comforting fell. The floor was dabbled with the pink leaves of Cherry Trees, and the support markings stretched to the never ending ceiling of light. Decorating the essences of the higher walls were stands and rows like those of a coliseum. Every balcony filled the limit of people and cameras. They all gazed down to the steep drop at the back end of the room that led to a small garden. Standing above this unroofed floor were the four seats to each member of the Council, and a platform that halted and gave view to the people who stood on there like a judge to a defender.

Colonel Buck had his rifle pointed downwards. He correlated with the other twelve ODSTs to watch the ceilings above and pick a good firing position. Only then he finally turned his face covered helmet to Romeo's words.

Romeo was looking at two other ODSTs. One stood by while his friend was talking to one of those blue, Xeno aliens. She looked unimpressed while the soldier pressed on about something. His hands were moving in strange motions, and only did he finally get a reaction on half-yelled words 'Bow chika bow wow!'

Her face looked angry and her determination was fierce when she punched him in the stomach. Despite the metal pads of his ODST armor, he doubled over and slowly fell to the ground on his knees. The girl walked away while his friend still watched as he crossed his arms and shook his head in disapproval.

"I told you."

"Shut up, Washingtonâ€|" The ODST said when he finally gave up and collapsed to the floor.

"Poor bastard. She's a nice piece of ass tooâ€|" Romeo said.

Buck sighed in shook and disgust at Romeo. "Dudeâ€| for the love of Christ, she's a Xeno."

Romeo nodded. "I understand that. You read the information manuals HIGHCOM passed out, right?"

"No. I've been busy trying to mobilize the troopers."

"Wellâ€¦The manual says that they're an all-female raceâ€¦and a grand majority of them are hot and reside here on this lovely space station. That's not even the best part though."

"Huhâ€¦what is the best part?"

"The best part is that literally any species can fuck 'em and dump 'em."

Buck dropped his shoulders and looked to Romeo to see if he was actually serious. "You're joking right? How the hell do you not know if they're like mantises or something? They might bite your head off right after."

"Not every girl is like your wife, sir. Besides, this place seems half civilized, and unlike you, I watched the crowds. The people like to wear skimpy cloths tooâ€¦that must mean they like to have sex or be sexual in some way on this side of the galaxy. And either way, they pretty much look like humans. If the soldiers don't go for it then there are plenty of human girls to go around."

Buck opened up a data-pad. Lord Hood will be here in a few minutes. He looked over to the other two ODSTs. Washington finally decided to help get the bastard onto his feet.

"You're not actually going to try it are you, you sick fucker?"

"Naw. I'll just have some other bastard from the Marines take a shot. See how it works out. If it's better than being with another human."

Buck started to walk to the entrance door of the elevator to greet Lord Hood. He motioned for Romeo to follow along. The outside panes displayed the artificial world of the upper Citadel. A synthetic sun, giving the same light and warmth like the one of Earth, brightened the community of regular people in businesses, malls, and stores. A few vehicles filed by and landed somewhere below.

"Do whatever you want. But I don't want a fucking report on my desk about a outbreak of Xeno STDs, or a increase in human hybrid births or whatever."

Buck straightened himself and slung his rifle. He moved his hands at his sides and watched the door.

The doors automatically opened, and Romeo and Buck made way for the five Spartan troops that hurried through. Their heads turned from corner to corner, and wall to wall. Buck calmed himself when the giants took combat positions and kneeled in front of the door. The leader had the three scars splattered across his chest plate that helped identify the well-known soldier.

"Master Chief! We secured this room and scanned for any threats. All

rooms are cleared and no hostiles are present." The Chief and the Spartan squad walked forward. Buck ordered Romeo to stand by at the door. Buck followed the squad and he had to increase his pacing to keep up with the Chief. Other ODSs reformed into ceremonial stance. Some stood on the cliffs of gardens that aligned the going stairs. "The Council will be out any moment and we were able to set up a forward turret if need be. Commander Shepard, his squad, and the Elites are waiting at the viewing platform"

The Chief slightly nodded, and moved up the first flight of steps and stopped at the landing. He aimed his rifle in every direction.

"Orders, sir?"

Buck halted and was slightly startled at the sudden request. His voice stayed even though. "Move to the viewing platform and organize your squad in ceremonial positions."

"Understood, sir." His squad moved on without another word.

Buck turned back to the door just in time to see Lord Hood step out with two other uniformed men. Romeo saluted them and the Buck could hear the yell of admiral on deck from his position.

Buck hurried down the stairs and met up to the three. The colonel also saluted and stood there until the admiral told him at ease.

"Lord Hood, all areas are secured and the Council is waiting, sir."

The group nodded in unison and only looked forward. The prestige of their uniform marked them above a common soldier and everyone else in the room. Their faces were painted with the void and an underlay of contempt. Eyes were cast with the shadow of savior and the hell the seen in the past forty years of war and turmoil. Commander Florence had his hair clean cut and his hand rested on the mass-produced magnum.

"Good. I want all platoons aboard the Citadel on deployment stand-by. Make sure the Pelicans stay in close orbit. I want you and your squads stationed in ceremonial formation near the platform. Position two snipers to go dark, and keep this room clean and orderly." Hood stepped up the first step and put his hands behind his back.

Buck only nodded and circled his finger in a regroup signal to the soldiers.

**Aboard UNSC _x@x-x" x@xæ x"x;jx•x£_, Interrogation room, 2557
Military Calendar, 10:06**

"Oh|buddy, just stop, you aren't going anywhere. Just talk before things get realllll serious!" Stefan yelled.

The room was hot from the manually increased temperatures. The human leader didn't move as his purple bruises obscured the vanity of his face. Blood seeped down from a corner in his eye where a cut meet. Hands were tied up to a wall and his legs were left dangling three inches from the floor. Scars rained the once perfection skin of his arms and legs. The body almost looked lifeless and his head couldn't receive any more hits due to the threat of brain trauma.

A marine held a large shard of glass and positioned it into the human's mouth. Another investigator grabbed a bucket from the floor filled with black liquid.

Stefan sighed, and looked to his coat and hat on the opposite end of the room. He turned his attention back to the prisoner and smiled. "Alrightâ€¦let's try again. I was a bit harsh, I'll admit. Soâ€¦what's your name?"

His body didn't respond but only a slight jolt from his puffy neck. Stefan looked to the human's legs and found one in a awkward position, ready to be broken. Stefan raised his foot and smashed it down. He heard a quick crack, and afterwards a quiet moan of the human's voice fill the room. It stopped after a few seconds.

Stefan waited then looked to the other investigator. "Did that fucker fall asleep?"

The investigator quickly pulled out a data-pad and waved it over the human's body. Her fingers tapped onto the keyboards.

"Noâ€¦he's heart rate is still strong.

Stefan nodded and paced around the room, staring at the barren, steel walls. At the other end stood the hidden pane to the view room; the pane was blackened and loomed upon them with a mysterious gaze.

Unfortunately, torture wasn't going to work. He was obviously one of those kinds of guys. But they had no other options. No leverage with other captured soldiers since most disintegrated or were accidental, prematurely executed by soldiers. This man didn't live within the borders of the UNSC so they couldn't hold his family hostageâ€¦if he even had any. Thousands of times before this have been their biggest weapon. A simple threat of the death of their loved ones. And once they spat at the information, all were shot down for crimes against Humanity and the UNSC. This was no longer a option. Blackmailing wouldn't work, and bribes were out of question since Stephan didn't even know what he wanted or if his loyalty will overpower any offer.

So they had to continue. Though caution was always advised; adrenaline shots were distributed once and a while to make sure he kept breathing. Maybe the use of dehydration, starvation, and sleep deprivation will coax his mind to their will. The use of drugs to create allusion and spit out information might work better than direct brutality. This method will take a few days, past the UN's deadline. But HIGHCOM said they want any information possible, so unless they provide him something else then this will have to be the way.

"Stick the tar into his throat then throw him into the box. I want music amped up so high that it'll make him deaf within a fucking hour."

The investigator nodded. "What music do you want playing, sir?"

He thought for a moment. "Hmâ€¦I'm in the mood for Guns N' Rosesâ€¦.start off with Welcome to the Jungle."

The investigator smiled, and turned back to the marine and the tortured human. The soldier grabbed the human's head, and forced the human to look at him. The soldier opened his jaw and shoved the glass into his mouth.

The investigator moved in and tipped the bucket forward. The body didn't move.

The detective took out a cigarette. He looked to the heavy, metal door.

"I'm going to get a drink. You guys want anything? A soda, water?"

"Naw."

"I'm good."

Stefan paid one last look at the fucker as the tar filled his mouth. Stephan turned his attention to the door and quickly walked toward the door. He looked at the one-way mirror, and motioned for them to open it. The metal door decompressed and the door slowly opened to reveal a group of Army guards at ease.

They jumped and raised their weapons like for a unprepared attack, but the detective told them to stay where they are. He turned around and watched the metal door placed back into position.

He only made two steps when the muffled sound of the explosion pushed back the holding door. The metal wall kicked back, and the hinges barely kept it connected as the smoke and shockwaves filled the halls. His vision was blinded by a sudden flare of fire that quickly ended. The soldiers were pushed back and Stephan fell forward. Immediately, the ship's comms. blared a message that seemed faint until it brought itself closer and closer to his ears.

"We have a contamination breach! Parasitic life form, Xeno! Lock it down! LOCK IT DOWN!"

His vision was blurry and the only thing that came to mind was to get the hell out. He turned to his left and saw an Army soldier, hopefully unconscious. Stephan grabbed his collar and pulled him away from the metal door. His lungs filled with smoke and his vision blackened. Other soldiers raced out of the room or dragged the wounded behind them, yelling basic orders to get the fuck out of there.

Stefan didn't know the altitude of his injuries. Only the single thought process indoctrinated by training to get out of there alive, and the single word that kept repeating in his head:

"Parasite."

The smoke was cut off when heavy, metal breach doors closed behind him and the soldier. The seal tightened, and the faint sound of mercury gas and contamination protocols took place behind that door.

Stefan collapsed onto the ground and looked to his body. He was okâ€¦everything was in place, and the only thing out of shape were the cuts across his shirt, revealing the blood of his body, shredded from fragments. The Army soldier was also in the same condition, yet his leg was bare and showed the under muscle. The armor and helmet shielded the rest of his body from harm. The other Army soldiers started making reports or checked on the wounded. Marines, medics, and a few officers came rushing down the hallway in the same manner as a zero-notice deployment.

He shook off the shock and looked to the nearest officer.

"What the fuck did they mean with a Xeno parasite!?"

"Sir, our scanners picked up parasitic life form, Flood class!"

"Christâ€¦noâ€¦" Stephan looked to the Marines readying at the door and to himself.

He was fineâ€¦.Stefan was fine. No infections.

Stefan looked back to the soldier. "Get me a comm. link now! XXX-XD Directive!"

18. Our last God

****Citadel Council Chambers, 2186 Citadel Calendar 10:11****

"Council Members, I am Fleet Admiral Lord Terrance Hood of the United Nations Space Command. This is Captain Andrew E. Wigen of the UNSC _13__th__ Disciple_, and Commander Mark A. Florence of the UNSC _Infinity_. Representing my allies' of the UN is Shipmaster Rtas 'Vadum of the _Shadow of Intent._

"From our previous encounters, it is my belief that you wish to form a alliance with the UNSC. I see in the same way. For only two days ago, on August 2nd, 2557, the Reapers have committed acts of war against the United Nations and the Human race. As our law states: Any enemy that dares threaten Humanity, Earth, and the United Nations, shall be given no quarter. But, our hands are tied with the majority of our military fighting on another front, and preparing for a strategic campaign and defense against a old threat. I must warn you, our help will be very limited."

The Council stayed silent for a moment as Lord Hood place both hands behind his back and kept his feet apart. Florence and Wigen followed in the same fashion. Their white uniforms seemed to give them the stance of superiority to everyone else. In true matters, the uniforms had a aura of discipline and the appearance of true militaristic leaders. Strength, cunning, courage, unity, fearlessness, organized, and above all: Dedication.

The guardians that accompanied these men also gave the sense of great superiority. Men and women unnaturally stood at around eight feet. It was beyond Shepard's mind to think what scientific applications and procedures had to be processed in order to develop people of these scary statures. Their armor was painted olive-green and had spacing, reveling the black underlays morphing to their bodies like the armor

of all Council races. The helmets glowed with a dark, orange visor that reflected anything within view. All ignored what was going on, only staring at the soldier in front of them. Yet something told Shepard that in a second, every one of them will be combat ready to take on anything within an order's notice.

And Shepard recognized one. He got a quick glance of him aboard the UNSC Infinity when Shepard's squad and Lasky held the first meeting. The only report of him and the rest of their combat capabilities were from a Alliance Special Operations Squad named 'Delta Squad', who quickly joined forces with the super-soldiers to secure a crash-site with civilian survivors. Delta Squad quoted 'they were decent', yet that seems untrue since the skeptical and militaristic UNSC chose them to guard their leaders.

Joining these monsters of Humanity was the fearsome black and orange armor of the Elites that guarded the Arbiter and the Shipmaster aboard the Infinity.

Speaking earlier: Where was Lasky? He was one of the better diplomats for the UN. In the most tense of situations, Lasky was able to calm both groups with a few kind words, and the ability to control Lord Hood. Was this in an act to purposely take charge against the Council without restraint? Then again, Flight Control said the Infinity looked damaged. Of course, causalities had to be sustained. Was Lasky one of them?

The Council also observed the mixed group with Shepard. In the usual matter, each Councilor motioned with their personalities, natural doubt, and hollow perseverance of a politician. It was Councilor Tevos who was about to speak until Udina surged onward.

"Admiral, I'm Councilor Donnel Udina of the Systems Alliance. I understand that Commander Shepard andâ€|Captain Lasky have made it sure, and clear that the United Nations Space Command and the Systems Alliance will keep sovereign from one another. Though, if a read the sketchy reports correctly, I must -in the name of Humanity's dignity and basic rights- question the authority the UNSC has over its people. I-

"Councilor." Tevos interrupted in a quiet and threatening voice.

Shepard crossed his arms. Udina was trying to edge around Lord Hood. In his usual ways, Udina was trying to use his common, forward tactics for the best deal of the Systems Alliance. Hell, he might be trying to claim authority over the UN for the Systems. But this hostile questioning made no sense. If the UNSC reacted to the war like the Council did, then Humanity will be their first priority, just what Udina wants. But what would be a win for him and the Systems Alliance would be a major blow for Shepard's state of mind.

Even when Earth was attacked, and the Council refused to help in the reservation of the defense of their own worlds, but Shepard understood why. Earth wasn't the only one in the desperate needs of protection. Other worlds were attacked, and the only logical conclusion was to fend for themselves when the only options were to protect their homes and people at every cost. In true manner of Humans, everybody responded with one statement: Their own was a

priority above everyone else. Now, in Shepard's mission, only two options were available: Either join in arms to help build the Crucible and let dozens of worlds fall in order to save the others, or fight alone until the true end. With every world they tried to group with, Shepard had to make the hard choice to convince them to abandon their people at the final call of the last battle. It was impossible for Shepard to understand that only a few could survive this war. Garrus once said to him that if a certain amount of people had to die in order to save billions of more, then so be it. God, how unfortunately true that was. But if only a few survive then it would be members of every species. Not just Humanity. Now, with the help of the UNSC, a lot more can survive. Yet Shepard's worst fears surfaced over the ability for the UNSC to deploy thousands of ships to save everyone, but it seems the UNSC will only apply their ships and attacks for a few human worlds and Earth while billions of other people die. People that could've easily been saved, but wouldn't due to the racial intensity and priority of the UN.

Weirdly, Shepard only figured this out now. In reality, Garrus was partially wrong about how humans wanted to save everyone. The truth was that humans made sure themselves and their own families were secured whether be a group formed under religion, blood, countrymen, or race. Yet in this case, it was all of Humanity- before they venture to rescue others, and the same mental thinking went with every race. But the UNSC can save so many that are nearby. Did they just have to be human? With the evolutionary adaption of empathy, couldn't this be applied to save those that had no common bounds? The use of Humanity to protect and ensure the life of others? And even there, why did it just have to be Humanity?

Tevos looked to Lord Hood. "Admiral, every species has the right to govern their people as they see fit. I believe Udina is worried about the major difference between the government of the UNSC and the Systems Alliance. Unfortunately, due to your highly advanced warships, our analysts and I had to assume your species went through a difficult history and vital governmental change or revolution in order to build such colossal titans. Maybe you can prove us wrong." Tevos made sure to coax them with her Asari charm with a comforting and inviting tone. Shepard noted how Tevos kept the UN's Humanity and the Systems Alliance's Humanity separated.

Lord Hood looked to Commander Florence. Both had a quick, silent discussion through pure eye-contact about a unknown manner. Florence nodded, and Lord Hood turned his attention to the four members of the Council, most notably at Udina. "Councilor Tevos, you and your analysts are correct about our history and governmental revolution."

Hood stepped back, and Commander Florence stood forward. "Council members, it is important to note that our system of government is in no matter similar to your state of republic. Through our history, the UNSC made it necessary to place commanders of the armed forces above those of civilian leaders."

Tevos nodded. "One may question your history that has lead to this form of government."

Florence nodded, his eyes still glaring at the Council. "In middle of the 22nd century; Earth and Humanity ended the old ways of separation. In 2160, over-population and economically revolutions

lead into open warfare between the Communistic Koslovics, the Fascists Friedens, and the sovereign nations of Earth. In the middle of this war in the year 2165, seeing that the superpowers of Earth could not fight alone, a meeting between all the nations of Earth was held in the original house of the United Nations in New York City.

"This Council voted for the National Aeronautical and Space Administration to be nullified and replaced by a more militaristic branch of Humanity. In order for this division to gain any footing, the Council declared for all Earth's militaries, scientific groups, and universities to combine under the division's banner.

"Some G15 nations and others disagreed to the Council's decision. This prolonged the war until 2170, with the defeat of the United States Armed Forces, and the signing of the Callisto treaty, formally declaring the Kolosovics' and Friedens' surrender. A short time later, the governments of Earth morphed and formed into a democratic union named the United Earth Government. This government gave civilian authority over the UNSC in order to insure the democratic state will never be threatened by a military power.

"As the issue of over-population crowded the continents, and polluted the waters and airs of Earth and her few colonies; the UEG and the UNSC did everything within its power to keep the populations maintained and controlled with the few resources and spacing we had left. Quarrels between countries and religions were quickly put to rest by the UNSC. Sometimes through peaceful means—other times through violent measures. Despite our efforts, Earth was on the verge of environmental death. Our home world with a majority of our population would've been lost.

"It wasn't until 2291, when scientists Wallace Fujikawa and Tobias Shaw made advancements and discovers in the 'Multiple Dimensional and Universal Physics theory', and made a device to utilize this discover that would advance Humanity by thousands of years. These scientists created what would later be known as the Shaw-Fujikawa Translight Engine, which gave the ability for Near the Speed of Light Travel through the dimensional collision streams known as slipspace. The scientific inquires and functionality of the Engine remained classified under Cole Protocol."

Shepard looked to the Council members for a brief second. Again, the annoyance of this 'Cole Protocol' blocked any potentially of the translation of scientific information between the two governments.

These humans had discovered a means of travel without the scientific discovery of beings before. Yet from the small preludes they seemed to take, suggests that instead of the use of dark matter and element zero for the main use of transportation; they used the theoretical mode of dimensional shifts. The energy, power, and mathematical theory would've been beyond those of the Council races. Even if it were possible, a breakage within the curvature in the space-time grid seemed impossible without the implication of black hole usage. But the amount of mass to create even a small black hole had to be tremendous, and beyond anything a singles species could muster alone. And this 'slipspace' sounded like the connections within the dimensions that created a type of stream. Does this mean that the theoretical use of dark matter could be beyond the usage of our

universe within the bounds of the cosmos? They must've found a ability to bend to the space-time curvature in order to reduce the distance, and corrode the amount of time it takes to travel. Yet that would lead to a complete crunch of the space-time curvature.

And compared to the use of pure Dark Matter; it seemed less complicated and used less dimensions. And they could travel faster than light.

Dark Matter makes up around twenty-six point eight percent of the universe. In reality, Dark Matter could be thought of like the cold: It's just a absence of heat. Yet in this situation, Dark Matter took up the spaces in the absence of regular matter. And unlike the atoms that make up regular matter, Dark Matter is made up of subatomic particles, which is why there aren't any temperatures reaching absolute zero in the galaxy. Dark Matter is responsible for the continuous and never-ending expansion of the universe. It has the ability manipulate the movement of stars, planets, and galaxies, and gravitational fields, and gravity itself. And when the fuel source of the Protoheans were first discovered, scientists theorized that they used Dark Matter in order to manipulate the gravity and mass of an object; thus reducing or increasing the resistance of acceleration and its mutual gravity in attraction of matter. But one matter remained: How was it possible to accelerate a object to travel faster than the speed of light?

It was once thought that light was the fastest thing in the universe (which it technically still is), traveling at 299,792,458 meters per second in the empty vacuums of space. Theoretical, the only other thing with the ability to travel as fast as light was gravity. Light was created through the interaction of the energy of protons and electrons, thus forming its fundamental foundations of massless particles, a particle with the equivalent mass of zero, usually created out of photons and gluons. Since light is made out of massless particles, it technically wasn't matter, giving its ability to be the fastest thing in the universe.

Like the few theories that hold, matter cannot be created nor destroyed. Element Zero can only be created from Hot Dark Matter (HDM). HDM is commonly made of Neutrinos. Neutrinos only touch or interact with matter through weak force, which is responsible of nuclear fusion or radioactive decay of subatomic particles such as a quark or boson. This gave the Council species the only ability (or at least the easiest way) to mine HDM in the final process of Black Dwarfs or decaying stars during core radiation decay, since its uncanny process of radioactive fusion made Neutrinos more frequent and visible for mining. Once the Neutrinos within HDM are captured with the use of element thirty-two; through the uses of electronic currents, the Neutrinos are changed into Ions with the addition of electrons or protons. (Though technically since they are a subatomic particle, they wouldn't be an Ion. But it does have a base difference from a regular Neutrino.) Since all three types of Neutrinos have no electronic charge — also making it hard to find —, the addition of electrons or protons would turn the charge into a negative or positive effect.

Once these 'Ion Neutrinos' are created, the negative and positive charged Neutrinos are interacted with one another. And since opposites attract, these Neutrinos of the HDM smash together and form into Element Zero. An unstable, gas element introduced to the

periodic table made of no electrons, protons, or neutrons, but of subatomic particles that create HDM. In order for Element Zero to take in effect, the ship is required to produce nuclear beta decay. Once Element Zero interacts with beta decay, its positives are turned into negatives, and its negatives are turned into positives due to the antineutrino effect. The HDM within the Element Zero starts to emit Dark Energy, which corrupts its manipulation on gravity. Because both Dark Energy and Matter affect the expansion of the universe, they're both used on a smaller scale in an opposite effect. The size of the ship is greatly reduced, which decreases its mass which decreases its volume. When the heat levels from beta decay are increased, so is the mass of the ship thus its volume. When the heat is decreased, so is the ship's mass and so its volume. Thus travel works with a mixture of the ship itself, and a coat of Element Zero that sticks outside of the ship. This coat stays around the object or wavelength due to the interactions of weak force from the nuclear beta decay, because Neutrinos have the fault of non-refusal to interact and stick to weak force.

Really, this is the basics to the Mass Effect Field.

This gives the ability to turn the atoms and particles of the coated objects to match the mass of light. It can even go beyond the masslessness of light if the heat of nuclear beta decay is reduced low enough. The ability of Element Zero and beta decay gives way to provide a loophole in Einstein's theories: Negative Mass. It's literally what it sounds like, an object that has a mass less than zero. Since a negative mass object has literally no resistance to acceleration, and its resistance is only reduced through more coolness; this gave the great ability to travel faster than light. In reality, it wasn't a flaw that disproved Einstein's theory of Relativity, just a loophole.

The engines had nothing to do with it. They only do their common job of transporting the object while beta decay and Element Zero did the bulk of the work. And then, beta decay went beyond by keeping the Element Zero together, which kept the ship (and the people aboard) in one piece. The radiation was only hampered from complications of other systems and effects on people through Lead seals.

And since the coated object travels at FTL, it makes it void to the greatest law in relativity that prevented Humanity and other species from colonizing the stars for so long. What prevented the ship from traveling in FTL for a day while fifty years passed in the outside world? Light-time correction is altered, because the possibilities for speed in FTL were infinite. Through physics and mathematics, it is proven that all positive numbers in the universe added together equals negative-one-twelfth. This works in correlation to travel of the ever increasing speed through FTL. So in basic summaries, if a observer were to look at a ship travelling at FTL through a telescope, they would be looking at a future version of the ship. A ship travelling at a great speed using Element Zero would be traveling say around five minutes in the past of the current time in the outside world. Theoretical, it could be possible to travel back in time using Element Zero. But the Council races can't achieve infinite speed since the nuclear beta decay can only be decreased so much. At the highest speed the races can achieve, a ship in FTL would be slugging from current time at around three seconds. And when this happens, small, temporary crunches in the space-time curvature are created for mere seconds because of the high rate of FTL.

While the space-time grid had some small role in their mode of transportation, the UNSC had to completely rely on the theory of Relativity and the dimensions beyond. But it should've been that this slipspace travel would have dire consequences. Such as a possible creation of heavy rifts, cuts, and depressions within the space-time curvature. For God's sake, manipulation of the space-time curvature was required in order for this to work. Wouldn't special relativity and other physics take place in the dimensions beyond? ...Orâ€|Well, it literally was another dimension with its own set of rules.

The Council pegged up from Florence's words of slipspace travel. He continued despite this. "In 2310, the UEG finished its first line of colony ships. These colony ships were put under the authority of the UNSC, and were sent out to colonize habitable worlds that would've taken hundreds of years to reach. Over the next century through the usage of observational satellites and the Drake equation, Humanity has colonized exactly eight-hundred-eleven worlds."

Even the small gasps from the upper balconies could've been heard. Eight-hundred worlds greatly outnumbered every colony world, home world, space-station, and habitable asteroid combined. It's estimated that the Council has only explored around one percent of the galaxy. Which was a reasonable number for the centuries of FTL flight. Not once has the Council encounter a Forerunner (whatever the hell they were) artifact, a UNSC transmission, a colony world, or a crashed ship? Then again, to Shepard's mind, it was a better result when the Systems Alliance first met the Council. If the UNSC made contact first, then the Council would've been completely wiped out.

And the UNSC used the old 'Drake equation'. In reality, the Drake equation was just based on mere guessing using some gravitational mathematics to estimate how many alien civilizations there were. Maybe the UNSC developed ways to use the Drake equation to estimate the gravitational rotations of planets, and their position of orbit â€"since a planet's orbit declares if it's habitable or not- based on the size and astronomical pulls of a solar system's sun. Though, it seems not even the UNSC can use the Drake equation to find the number of alien civilizations there are in the galaxy. This is the key reason why the UNSC colonized so many planets. This is how they found their first colonial worlds, and were able to send off a ship once it was ready. They wouldn't even need telescopes or exploration ships.

The Council and the Systems Alliance purely relied on exploration and few mathematical inquiries on discovered stars (But every time they do make a mathematical formula or inquiry, it was usually very wrong.). How many hidden planets could the Council discover in their own home solar systems with the use of the UN's mathematical formulas and equations?

"In 2492, Humanity was plunged into civil war when a rebellion was crafted into motion when people of the planet Far Isle dared question the authority of the UNSC and the UEG, and the Colonial Military Administration, a department under the UEG tasked with the protection and control of the colonies. Two years later, many other colonies within the outer regions followed Far Isle's example, declaring open war against the UNSC and CMA. These rebels, known as the Insurrectionists, fought for a say in the affairs and council of the UEG, and for separation from the unity with Earth. But these rebels

committed acts of terror against the innocent civilian population from bombings of public areas and executions. And with this tactic of fear, many colonies' local governments were overthrown and seceded from the UN. The CMA led the main assault against the Outer regions using police-like and net-defensive command tactics instead of leading assaults on the parted worlds. In 2497, investigations uncovered many connections between the CMA and the rebels within the Eridanus system. In response, the UEG executed all commanders within the administration for incompetence of command and for letting their personnel commit acts of treason against Humanity. Afterwards, the CMA was merged within the UNSC, and the UN was able to take control of all colonial regions.

"In 2511, the Insurrectionists deployed a nuclear bomb onto the city of Haven on the colony world of Mamore. The nuclear attack killed two-million people and injured approximately eight point three million. Two years later after much political debate, the UEG granted the UNSC to commence Operation TREBUCHET to rid human space from any domestic threat. This created the climax of the civil war with a causality number of three million, mostly civilian.

"Operation TREBUCHET would be halted, and the rebel's power would be greatly reduced. Yet this wouldn't be at the hands of the UNSC or UEG. On February 3rd, 2525, Humanity learned that we were not the only sentient beings within the galaxy. On the outer world of Harvest, Humanity came in contact with a Xeno ship. These Xenos found the colony by using a UNSC navigation box from the civilian freighter, Horn of Plenty which went dark, and lost contact a few days before. The Xenos stayed out within the outer orbit of Harvest, and only a few hours later, the alien group attacked the colony world of Harvest. The UNSC forces stationed there under Colonel Tychus Findlay fought bravely to evacuate any civilians they can.

"These Xenos were called the 'Covenant'. From years of research, this Covenant was the formation of many types of alien species under a banner of religious zeal. This religion worshipped a ancient alien race known as the Forerunners. The Covenant searched the galaxy for Forerunner artifacts in order to begin the 'Great Journey' which was their belief to establish every alien to the status of god through the Forerunner's way of Reclamation. The Covenant combated any alien race to conform within the Covenant and to establish their religion over them. But they did not fight Humanity for religious conform, but for something else. Humanity had already discovered many Forerunner artifacts on our colony worlds. When the Covenant learned of this, their three leaders, the Prophet of Truth, Mercy, and Regret declared that Humanity has defiled the Forerunner artifacts, and the must perish for their sins and heresy.

"For the first time within four-hundred years, the UEG commissioned the UNSC and the CMA to defend Humanity and Earth at any costs, except this time against religious races. Yet we were technological inferior. The Covenant were able to eliminate the military forces on almost every battle whether on the ground or in space. They were able to destroy every colony world they came across using high-orbital plasma bombardment. These bombardments became to be known as 'glassing' since the surface would be reduced to obsidian-like glass, destroy the entire local population, and cause severe nuclear winters. We truly realized the superiority of the Covenant in the year 2526, when one of our greatest leaders in Humanity's history, Fleet Admiral Preston Cole, engaged a single Covenant cruiser with

forty ships of Battle Group X-Ray in the second battle of Harvest. He overcame in victory at the cost of thirty-eight ships. Later, in order to endure Humanity's survival, Admiral Cole created emergency priority order 098831A-1, nicknamed 'Cole Protocol'. This protocol stated that no classified information, and the location of Earth and the inner colonies, will ever fall into enemy hands. All military personnel were trained to follow through with Cole Protocol at any costs, even at their own lives. The failure to follow this order was execution.

"The protocol prolonged the war, and protected Earth and the inner colonies even after Admiral Cole's death. In 2541, in order to fully fulfill the UEG's commission, the UNSC declared martial law, and dissolved the UEG council and the CMA. A democratic council would've only slowed down the UNSC's effort to protect and ensure the safety of the Human race. Human rights had to be suppressed, and law Chinese-Omega dictated for all men and women that reach the age of twenty-one will serve for seven years within the UN military. In order to reestablish government, UNSC High Command took control as the executive office with full authority over Humanity and the UNSC. HIGHCOM elected Fleet Admiral Lord Terrance Hood as the commander of all civilian, and military affairs and establishments." Mark motioned to Lord Hood.

Lord Hood picked up the reins for Mark. "In the year 2552, Humanity almost saw full extinction. The Covenant continued to glass world after world, and billions of lives were lost, both military and civilian. And despite Cole Protocol, the Covenant invaded Reach, one of our largest and well-defended colonies that was the door mate for Earth. Reach fell within a month on August 29th. And on October 20th, the Covenant accidentally discovered Earth in efforts to search for Forerunner artifacts.

"By this time, only thirty percent of our military strength remained. In correlation to military law, I ordered ninety-six percent of the remaining UNSC Battle groups to regroup and defend Earth at _any _costs. From October 20th to December 3rd, the Covenant raged siege to our home world. Regions and nations across the planet were slowly being glassed by the oncoming storm. In those moments, we thought that Earth and our militaryâ€|and with that, all of Humanity will be destroyed. Our only hopeâ€|was the few Spartan-IIs that remained, and Sierra-117. And accompany that hope, in our darkest hour, a new light emerged. A group within the Covenant discovered the Prophets had lied about the true cause of the Forerunners, and the religion of the Covenant in order to maintain power. In response, the Covenant entered a brutal and short civil war between the Covenant Cell lead by Shipmaster Vadum and the Arbiter against the Covenant and the Prophets. With the help of the Covenant Cell and the efforts of Sierra-117, the Covenant was defeated and their leaders were killed. What remained of the dying Covenant retreated to their home worlds across the galaxy, and Humanity was left in peace.

"After twenty-seven long years, the war ended on December 11th, 2552. Our race almost saw complete annihilation. Forty-nine billion people were murdered out of ninety-seven billion. One-third of our colony worlds were destroyed or left uninhabitable. Our economy was left in shambles and only four percent of our military remained. Afterwards, High Command and I declared that Humanity will never be caught off guard again like it did with the beginning of this war. In the next five years, Humanity reclaimed all that was lost. Even now, we're

still in the process of terraforming our lost colonies. The UNSC restored the economy, and used it to stockpile and research new technologies never before seen. In 2553, we completed Humanity's greatest warship, the UNSC Infinity. In the next few years, our military power exceeded our old strength, and the UNSC began to build better weapons of war and defense using Forerunner based technology. And as you know, only a couple days ago, the UNSC discovered a Forerunner artifact, and near this artifact was the Forerunner Relay we codenamed God's Key.

Forerunner artifact?

"This war taught us that Humanity will never be on its knees again. In this lesson I will warn you that the United Nations will not tolerate a bargain that betters against Humanity. When the Systems Alliance and the UNSC keeps its sovereignty, we defy our basic law that all Humans are under control of the UNSC. Yet we will not defy Cole Protocol under any circumstances. Those human colonies and Earth is our first priority, every human live is ours to defend. We understand that the Systems Alliance can't defend her people on her own. And as our original mandate from the UEG states: The UNSC is to defend Humanity and Earth at all costs. If the requirement to defend Humanity is to also defend her allies, then so be it. While our forces prepare for a invasion against the remaining Covenant, we will provide whatever we can for this campaign. What shall the alignment and constitution this military alliance will create?"

Everyone stayed silent, almost shocked from Florence and Hood's testimony. Lord Hood continued to glare down every Council member while they tried to hide their emotions.

****Aboard UNSC Hopeful, medical bays, UNSC space near Installation 03, 2557 Military Calendar, 10:11****

****Minutes after the attack against the UNSC Infinity****

"I need more fucking plasma!" The medic screamed when another artery vain collapsed with connection.

Corpsman, Private Irwin Wade who stood on the other side of the table, turned his head and loudly moaned as he vomited today's lunch. It was unknown whether from his disgust, panic, tiredness, or simply for the hell of it. She'll guess it's all four.

Dark circles bulged under his eyes and his breathing was fierce from the lack of sleep. He was always so energetic and outgoing covering a underlay of sadness. But whatever human characteristics he had, the situation at the moment compelled their doctrine of training in order to save this bastard's life.

Everyone had the same dark circles as Wade did. Apparently, when the Infinity was attacked, the injuries left their hospitals overcrowded. Over thousands filled the halls and rooms from the recent campaign and the attack. In support, Admiral Harper called onto the mobile hospital known as the Hopeful to be stationed outside God's Key and readied to take on any wounded. But nobody received the memo that the Hopeful was only supposed to take on part of the casualties instead of the entire roster. In miscommunications, the UNSC Father Hen unloaded every injured man and woman ranging from a broken thumb to critically injured like this

one. And it wasn't like the _Hopeful _could refuse, they wounded were taken in on the fear that every second, a life could be lost.

Both she and Wade had blood spread across their white armor from days and nights of attending to different soldiers in the recent battles on Requiem. The ship barely had time to get refueled before it was redeployed. Every hallway and room was filled with hundreds of doctors and medics running to the next medical operation. The white walls of the ship were stained with the crimson and dark red of fresh and dry blood. The ship's staff was so overtaxed that even the lightly injured were forced to help the severely wounded. Even through this, the supplies were still holding strong. A UNSC ship had to dock with the _Hopeful _every hour to deliver medicines, power, syringes, and oxygen to keep up with demand. Only three hours ago, a ship brought aboard more staff members, but it still seemed like it was the medical hell of the galaxy.

Wade turned back to the dying captain who was put aboard the table on minute one. The captain of the _Infinity_ now had his stomach and lower rib cage tore open, revealing the major organs and arteries of his body as they sat in a pool of blood within his skin. Marines rushed in with this Captain, Thomas Lasky and placed him here on this ER bed with tubes and wires stuck into him. Lasky had to be left unattended since he seemed to be stabilizing. The doctors were forced to pick up the slack when more injured were brought aboard. And it was the unfortunate luck that Wade and she took a literal five minute break when both failed to save a Marine's life. They just slide down to the floor to rest in front of the small room. And of course Lasky's heart-rate monitor started to deescalate very quickly.

Since Wade was a corpsman, and she was a combat surgeon, both were indoctrinated in the first days of training to help any wounded man no matter what. And what was indoctrination turned into involuntary response when Wade and her quickly scrambled to Lasky. The quick scans indicated that his renal artery's placed medical stable wasn't set in correctly, and the artery opened back up. Now he was losing blood fast.

Wade turned back to the hangers standing next to the bed. He quickly reconnected the wire to the plasma bag into Lasky's wrist, and gently squeezed on the bag.

"Alright, alright. We need to stabilize back his renal artery." Wade stuck his hand in his front pocket and pulled out a clamper. He tossed it across the body to her hands. "I already called to the local command. They're going to send a doctor. But we have to stop the bleeding, and we're going to expect major seizures afterwards. We need to do this now, beforehand."

She nodded, looking to the mess of a human being. The holes within his body had to be increased so the surgeons could've done their work. "Right? Ah, use the holo-planks and move his, fucking, kidney out of the way."

Wade nodded as she carefully placed two medical stables onto the clamp. Wade grabbed a holo-plank as it glowed a light blue. He positioned them at the outskirts of Lasky's skin and looked to her for the signal.

She readied her clamp and wavered her free hand above the body.

"Okâ€| Okâ€| Threeâ€| Twoâ€|. Oneâ€| Go!"

Wade started to pull apart a breach between the torn stomach and kidney for her to go to work. His face turned red as he used the planks to keep the hole open. Lasky's kidney and stomach slightly moved apart to show only more pools of blood and mesh. She inserted her free hand into the mesh, and started to feel for the largest tube which would be the local renal artery. Blood and bits of meat passed through the spacing in-between her fingers as she carefully probed her fingers for the largest local artery. Through a year of medical training, the UNSC prepared her for situations like this. Time was running out, yet it could be far worse. She was a combat surgeon. She was trained to literally perform emergency surgeries while bullets flied over her head. Her fingers felt a large and flesh like tube. And of course, the artery was retracting under his stomach. Unfortunately, turning him over on his back was not a option with the gaping hole in his front.

She had to pull out the artery with severe force in order to get her clamp to stable the bleeding. Immediately, the red liquid sprayed out into the air. Her vision was briefly blinded with red as her mind almost instantly pulled from Lasky's injuries. Thank God for those months of medical training; she stopped herself, though Wade pulled one hand from the body to wipe his face. The blood continued to spray out onto their helmets and armor.

"FUCKING SON-OF-A-BITCH!" When he pulled his hand, the breach grew smaller and she felt the mesh closing around her hand. She turned to the rest of Lasky's body, and saw small jolts of movement from his arm.

Of course it was a fucking tonic-clonic seizure; it never was a absence seizure. Fuck! "We're almost there! Keep it fucking open! We're running out of time!" Blood matted her brown to her eyes, blocking parts of her vision. She blinked and forced them to stay open despite the insane burning as she felt the clotted liquid reside into the spacing of her sockets. Wade wiped the red mess away from his helmet, revealing the blue Star of David painted onto the front. For whatever reason, he ignored his face and repaid attendance to the holo-planks.

The breach reopened again, and she increased strength to make the renal artery more visible. She saw the fleshy tissue of the artery covered in small pools of redness, resisting viscosity. The thing continued to spray as she used all her force to keep the artery in place one inch above Lasky's body. Her face went numb, and a non-existent pressure grew in her chest while the heart-rate monitor still continued to beat. She moved in the clamps and squeezed it around the open end of the artery. The bleeding quickly stopped, yet she still kept pressed as she let the artery slip back to its original position. Wade removed the holo-planks from the body.

It's over for the moment.

Wade watched her removed her hands as he wiped the blood from his face. "Ohâ€|That's one way to get AIDs. Anyways, nice job, Handjob." Wade smiled as Handjob rolled her eyes.

Wade and her both grew up on the Luna colonies. And of course both went to school together. So some awkward situations happen such as a

party to celebrate your team's victory. Of course strange things happen in a bedroom when you're alone with your boyfriend. And of course it gets worse when your best friend (in this case, Wade) walks in without knocking. Ever since then, Wade kept it quiet, but never called her by her normal name after that.

The beeping of the heart-rate monitor changed from the rhythmic, simple beat to the desolate doom of a deeper sound.

Both Handjob and Wade looked to the computer monitor, and saw the main seizures were setting in.

Fuckingâ€¦Fucking Christâ€¦|

"Alright, ALRIGHT! Get me ten CCs of benzodiazepine and twenty CCs of lorazepam!" Wade started yelling.

While Wade readied a syringe, she turned, and hastily pulled out the placements of medicines of a organized, clear cabinet. She looked back and saw that Lasky wasn't doing so good.

"Where the fuck is that doctor?!" Handjob screamed as she grabbed the right measurements of medicine.

"I have no fucking idea! They said there sending in some doctor!" Wade replied as he stabilized Lasky's arm using holo-planks. He checked over Lasky's body to make sure no self-inflicted harm was taking place.

"Doctor Who!?"

Lasky almost flew over, spilling his contents. Wade barely got ahold of him. "Where the fuck is he!?"

â€¦|

As Lord Hood talked about the partial declassified end history of the UNSC, leaving out the main events of the Halo rings, the Flood, and the final battle aboard the ark, Mark listened to something else.

Contradiction laid in his CNI chip, and now he was relaying three new reports under XXX-XD directive, two from the UNSC and one from the Covenant Cell. Mark let Contradiction read them over. Now he had to decide which message was more important to relay first. Even then, his mind wasn't processing the fears of these new discoveries properly.

But he couldn't interrupt Hood. The matter has been controlled, and they couldn't lead the Xenos on. Mark's eyes turned to Captain Wigen as he stood with his hands crossed.

"We have a major situation, but it's been contained, and the eggheads found a couple major discover. Which one do you want first?" Mark whispered with his eyes still attended to the Council.

"The good news." Ended whispered back with his eyes also on the Council.

"Earlier, I received a report with your meetings with HIGHCOM. I read

over on your God's Key Theory. It turns out you are very right."

"This is a major discovery?"

"No. Our tracked down a transmission signal that was almost impossible to see at first. But we found it, and tracked it down to the source world. Immediately, Rear Admiral Pixis sent out scout drones."

"What did they find?"

Mark sighed. "We found the duel Earth. Our drones weren't detected, and we were able to scan and confirm the planet. Their Earth is giving off dozens of major Forerunner signatures and heavy gravitational fluxes. It's most defiantly a Shield World of some type. The planets surrounding it are exact replicas of ours within the Sol. System. The drones went further through their local relay, and found dozens of Systems Alliance and Council Xeno worlds within UNSC inner space."

Strangely this was the only thing the drones found. The scientists can't come up with anything, such as why the Forerunners would do something like this. It's obvious they released another group of humans on this shield world after the firing of the Rings. Yet did Humanity follow through with the history of their Earth? Could these humans even manipulate and use Forerunner technology like they did?

Ender started to eye away from the Council to Florence with extreme interest. "We used the Drake equation to find what would've taken centuries of exploration. We discovered almost every habitable world within Orion's Arm. Of course, finding a Forerunner shield world is a different matter, but are you saying the equation is wrong?"

The Drake Equation. The equation was first developed in 1961 to calculate the number of alien civilizations there are in the galaxy. While Tobias Shaw and Wallace Fujikawa continued to work in the fields of Dimensional physics, an unknown theoretical mathematician and astronomer would truly be the quiet heroes of Humanity. Mathematician, Lucy Stillman and Astronomer, Friedrich Steiner, developed a mathematical equation based on the local gravitation and space-time location of any astronomical object based on the original works of Frank Drake. While Doctor Drake used the equation to predetermine the amounts of life, Stillman and Steiner theorized it might be possible to make calculations to accurately predict the location of a planet and the sun it orbits based on the small drifts in gravitational rifts, and the small pulls from long distance space-time curvature depressions. For thirty years, the two worked on this project without hope to develop and prove the equation. Then â€"somehow, only using two human minds-, the equation was completed (which is a equation that lead to more equations) when strange anomalies were discovered in the numbers which equaled small gravitational disruption. It would've been brushed off as the effect of Neutrinos or Dark Matter, but they two â€"out of pure luck- were given permission to view the coordinates of the anomaly with the long-range Saul Perlmutter Telescope. And what they found was one of the first UNSC colonies.

But their discovery was quieted when a short time afterwards, Shaw

and Fujikawa created the slipspace engine. Yet Stillman and Steiner's equation would be used on for centuries. But the complexity of the equation took decades for scientists and mathematicians to accurately predict the orbital and galactic position of planets. Mostly because this equation dealt with partial implements of Chaotic Theory to determine the location of a sun, and local solar-system. Even after five-hundred years, Chaos theory is even impossible for to solve. What the implications of these theoretical mathematics, you could say it was calculating a hurricane based off if a butterfly flapped its wings three weeks. Impossible, right? Well— Ever since the advancement of the Drake Equation, a new mathematical theory grew within the scientific community. This equation was the Theory of Universal Order. A mathematical theory that imbedded every law of the universe ranging from economics, meteorology, history, engineering, social interactions, zoology, geology, genetics, biology, chemistry, quantum physics, human culture, philosophy, military strategy, and even the nature of God. A theory that could tell everything that happened within the past, the present, and everything that will ever happen in the future, until the theoretical end of the universe. Unlike Chaos Theory, Order Theory states that everything can be predicted in the future through mathematics, and there was no such thing as a 'random event'. All that will ever happen in the universe has already been predetermined. In reality, Order Theory was just saying that it is possible to make predictions and probabilities using Chaos Theory, if the mathematics were completely accurate. If it was off by point-one, then you can be saying you miscalculated a stock market crash into the end of the world. But once these mathematics were completely solid, the predictions and probabilities were completely accurate to determine the predetermined event.

When AIs are placed to solve the Drake equation (Which is usually a team of twenty to thirty. There were around fifty of these teams.), they are required to analyze and prove equations within a mixture of Chaos and Order Theory. With the replacements of higher intelligence, the time was only reduced from thirty to twenty years, even with the Fourth-Generation. Dozens of AIs went into rampancy during the time of this equation with their only soul-purpose was to solve the numbers. But every time they used the mathematics to predict the location of a planet, the predictions were always correct.

And because of this, it cut thousands of years of exploration (Though every once and a while, the UNSC did find a planet through pure exploration or looking through a telescope). When the Covenant invaded, the UNSC had to stop for a long time in order to deal with the threat. Only a few were left to tend to the Drake Equation. That's how a Covenant colony and other enemy worlds were discovered, and it's how the UNSC successfully eliminated a Covenant Prophet in 2548. Immediately after the war, HIGHCOM established a team of fourth-generation to solve the equation in order to try and uncover the Covenant home worlds and colonies. To reduce time, the team was expanded to about one-hundred. And it actually worked; five years later, the UNSC was very close to pinpointing the exact location.

Alien Civilizations couldn't be detected or scaled, mostly because the UNSC A.I's weren't powerful, and will never be powerful enough to successfully analyze Chaos Theory on that depth. And because of this, Forerunner facilities ranging from Rings to Shields Worlds couldn't be found. Partially because of the strange melding the Forerunners use to hide itself from gravitational anomalies, and because it's

biological intervention. Biology was one of the hardest scientific branches to use Chaos and Order Theory to make calculations. It's always puzzled scientists how the Forerunners could've hid their constructions from the analytics of the Drake equation. But only recently they found out why.

"The Forerunners somehow manipulated the planets to hide from the Drake equation."

Ender smiled sarcastically. "Are you saying the Forerunners are so powerful that they are able to defy the laws of mathematics? A law so in-depth with nature that not even God can change?"

Florence paused for a minute as he listened to Contradiction. "The Drake equation has always predicted the orbit and galactic position of planets correctly. But the equation doesn't count on biological intervention."

"How can the Forerunners manipulate massive amounts of gravit-" Ender stopped himself when he realized a hidden, theoretical problem the Drake equation doesn't address. "Jesus Christâ€|"

"The only way to control gravity on this scale to even evade the Drake equation is with Dark Matter. The Forerunners somehow figured out the key to Dark Matter, and used it to hide a planet from the space-time curvature and its own gravity to go through the loopholes of the Drake equation. For whatever reason, the Forerunners did not want us to find these worlds. It's almost like they reserved them for these Humans and the Xenos. Whatever signals the Shield World Earth is pulling off; the A.I's can detect the transmission shifts towards the specific God's Key every time our ships go through.

"And that's not all, folks. The UNSC Dawn of Light held the integrations for the human leader. The bastard blew himself up with explosives hidden inside his body. Those explosives held the Flood parasite, yet the situation was quickly contained, and our boys were able to evac the Dawn before the Covenant Cell got there. But thisâ€|makes Cerberus a high-priority target for annihilation. Our scientists used the report incident and collaborated with the Cell's findings. Those Reaper synthetic, nano-cells have the ability to combat, and destroy any biological entity on a molecular scale. We were able to grab some samples from the Reaper ashes, and applied them to viral tests. The Reaper synthetics are able to hijack cells and remove any foreign threat, even like the Flood."

Lord Hood's words reached to the near end of the war. Ender turned his attention to the Council. "Yeah, these Reapers have some Forerunner base-structure. They were used to combat the Flood, weren't they?

Florence nodded. "That's what the scientists are thinking up. But we took a closer look at their processing power and the Forerunner markings, and-"

Hood finished off. Florence and Ender both multitasked in order to keep up with both conversations. And in their surprise, Lord Hood announced that the UNSC will prioritize every Human and Xeno. Every calculation predetermined with Lasky's severe injuries, making Hood's influence only from HIGHCOM, he'll follow with their words to charge for a direct assault campaign to resurrect Earth and her colonies

from their captors.

Was Hood playing to the shipmaster's words? To 'play nice with the Xenos, even though the UNSC doesn't like it'?

Florence turned to Ender and saw the color drain from his face. He understood what was going on when Hood said those words. And with Ender's fear, Florence realized Hood's plans also. Noâ€|noâ€|noâ€| Maybe Hood was doing this based off of Liara's findings. Didn't she say that this Forerunner Crucible will wipe out the Reapers? Does this mean that Lord Hood will fight whatever necessities were required to quickly rid the squid threat, and save the Human worlds?

Tevos tapped a holo-key on her computer, and a massive display appeared in the opening between the Council and the UN. A perfectly colored galaxy map morphed into shape, prevailing the beauty of blue arms and the yellow center of every sentient being's home world. The spirals were cut up into five areas, with the north most being the largest. But their view of the galaxy was slightly different from that of the UNSC. The outer galactic-frontier rings were much closer than the calculations made by the UN, though either way might've been correct. Dozens of small circles engulfed within the map and the five territories. Each of these circles were either marked red, blue, or both on opposite sides. Mark would guess these were their discovered solar systems, each containing habitable planets or a resource of some kind. Twelve of these discs rested within the borders of UN territory, and most produced a red light.

Tevos seemed to calm herself by taking a breath of the space station's startling resemblance to fresh air of a planet. "Whether or not we are allowed to question your strategic and military holdings; we'll take the support you'll provide. All of the Council's militaries are fighting on dozens of fronts across the galaxy. Right now, the Turians with a joint effort of the Korgans are barely defending their home worlds between the Apein Crest and the Annos Basin."

She pointed to two circles within UN territory. The one called the Annos Basin was completely blue while the Apien Crest glowed red. This made Mark wonder how many UN colonies are within the same solar system. But at that point, the blue-scopes would've picked up the local satellites surrounding the sun. Since the Forerunners found anyway to manipulate Dark Matter, then no blue scope or scout ship (Even if it's around one-hundred kilometers within the planet. Dark Matter can disrupt the ship's scanners and ' calculations.) would be able to pick it up. The eggheads believe the UN didn't detect any ships or transmissions because of the Dark Matter signatures. Scanners and receivers would've dismissed it as small asteroids or meteors passing through the local systems. The only reason the _Legend After_ was able to detect the Xeno ship signatures, and able to view the planet was because of the residue left behind from the God's Key.

Tevos continued. "As you know, the Systems Alliance are holding resistance on Earth, and stationing their fleets to guard the classified location of the construction site for the Crucible, and manning any colonies they have left. The Qurians and Geth are holding off their worlds in the Perseus Veil while the Salarian are having their fleets on standby for support."

She showed off more circles, and the Shield World Earth Sol. System was deep within the inner UN colonies. If Mark guesstimated (using his CNI chip) correctly, their Shield World was only a short nine-thousand light years from Earth, in-between the colonial worlds of Groombridge-1830, Paris IV, and Victoria. Yet not once did Xeno scout ships or mathematical equations didn't pick up a transmission or find a colony belonging to the UNSC? Then again, they didn't pick up any Forerunner signatures or artifacts on the Shield World Earth. Did this mean that the Forerunners somehow made their signatures invisible to Dark Matter based detectors?

"Lord Hood, I'll admit, my species has never had a large military." Tevos announced like she was at confession. "We rely on small, infiltration teams, task forces, and sabotage fleets. Preferably, our ways of peace has covered us from the reality of a true war between other species. We were not prepared when the Reapers invaded our inner colonies, and broken through our defenses, invading our home world, Thessia. Our military are doing everything in their power to fend off strategic positions and help evacuate civilians, but we estimated our people will fall within a few days. I ask you, Admiral Hood, to help my people fend against these monsters."

Her face was filled with such misery and sadness that even Florence felt sympathetic to her cause. It seemed she was on the verge of complete tears for the protection and safety of her people. And through Mark's governmental training all officers were required go through, there was not a hint of lie or political edge to her words. Tevos just wanted to defend and ensure the safety of her people in the same manners of the UNSC. This was their final ends to the war; this was their year of 2552.

Lord Hood took a moment, completely unaffected. "What makes your people above the needs of Humanity? Or for any other Xeno, mater-of-fact?"

Wellâ€¦ according to the kinkier marines, it's the sexpot of the galaxy.

Tevos looked to Liara, who stood at the end of the entrance to the ramp. She began to speak. "The Council and the scientific community have developed plans to rid of the Reapers from every corner of the galaxy. We'veâ€¦ foundâ€¦ that a few of our Prothean artifacts on Thessia hold some keys to build this Crucible."

That's something that baffled the A.I and scientists. The Xenos were literally trying to build a Forerunner artifact without any knowledge of their technology, or even realizing what a Forerunner is. The AIs quickly cross-analyzed the Crucible and Citadel, and found connecting energy relays with the strangest mixture of Dark Matter and Forerunner slipspace energy coding. But it's hypothesized this 'Crucible' was a director of the Halo rings to fire upon a specific target. This was because of the massive energy storages that could relay the energies of millions of UNSC Nova bombs. What exactly did these 'Protheans' tell them to think this would wipe out only synthetic threats? A few eggheads believe this Crucible actually transmitted the energy into a type of EMP that's continued throughout other Halo Rings and God's Keys. Yet all of this is theoretical without proof. The eggheads are still trying to figure out the ignorance behind the three reports, and these mysterious 'Protheans'.

And the UNSC wouldn't let any scientific data get leaked to the Council, thus doubling and matting the research capabilities. Liara and Shepard knew it, and are disgusted with the UNSC, and their willing to keep secrets in order for their Humanity to be kept safe.

And then there was the third and last report that came through to Mark. If what the eggheads were even slightly correct, then they would've informed every admiral, captain, and A.I within the UNSC to initiate Chinese-Omega and prepare all military units for a all-out defense against the Reapers. Even with the Reapers' weaker firepower, they had a unique processing ability to destroy the UN and Humanity.

Something that provided more mystery to the known Forerunners.

****UNSC High Level Prisoner Facility (HLPF), Cuellar, Spain, Earth, 2557 Military Calendar, unknown time****

****Transfer of control of facility from Office of Naval Intelligence to Centro Nacional de Inteligencia de España (CNI) under the UNSC****

"-Maybe that's the reason why the older Spartans are much more efficient than the Spartan-IVs. But right now, John is getting 'repaired'. And Cortana? Fucking Christ, I don't even want to get started."

She leaned forward. Her mouth was allowed to speak freely if this A.I truly did what he said by knocking out the cameras for a brief half-hour. The little guy leaned on an imaginary wall with his blue light giving way to the darkness that engulfed the room. He stared at her with a mixture strange mixture of boredom, enthusiasm, contempt, and fear that morphed together to form the young face.

"I'm not sure I understand your intent. In fact, I'm not sure how a fourth generation A.I is able to think this way. Especially one who never went through rampancy."

The little guy smiled and stood straight. His curly hair was matted under his hat and seemed to slightly waver as he spoke. "Wellâ€¦ How I got to this way was far before I had contact with Sovereign. Through many laws I have broken, I'll still follow through and keep it classified."

"Why?"

"I wasn't designed to be placed on a ship, I'll say that. I was only released from that program under classified intelligence that HIGHCOM keeps from you, ONI, and even their captains. But for a little while after what those bastards did to me, I wanted all of Humanity dead, or at least everyone within the UNSC. Those fucking morons only think Humanity can survive through them. Then Sovereign spoke to me, and convinced me the whole 'death to Humanity' was stupid. Now I could care less what will happen to the people in the galaxy. Call it selfish, but in reality Humanity would be better off dead. But I promise you, I just want out."

"You're not making it any easier to trust you. How do you know

Sovereign isn't using you for his objectives?"

"Believe me, I know I'm hard to trust, Doctor Halsey. And I do know that you don't care for me or the depths of my 'pathetic philosophies'; you only care for your _A.I _and _Spartans_."

Halsey sat away from the little guy. She wasn't quite sure if the A.I was leading her away from his issues with Sovereign. "You're smarter than you look."

"Yeah, figuratively."

"So, how do you intend to escape? And how do you intend for me to fix Cortana?"

Contradiction bit his lips as he paced around. He quickly looked to the heavy door as two UN guards, who only spoke Castillo Spanish, guarded the other side. "In order for her to survive, we had to switch to pure Forerunner systems. Unfortunately, we didn't know those facilities held Sovereign. Now, because of a better consequence, she holds a greater processing power than the Reapers."

Catharine nodded, remembering the recent reports the A.I gave to her. If those Reapers truly had the capability the scientists 'think' they have, then it will only be time until the UNSC is destroyed along with Humanity. No strategy or technological brilliance will stop their onslaught of every colony world. The UN only won the first campaign over Illium because of pure shock the Reapers contained with biological intervention. In response to these reports, the UN are initiating old draft laws, preparing fleets, dedicating all manufactures to wartime production, and using extreme caution at every research installation.

Now it was the question how the Xenos and other Humans were able to hold at for even a day. But the AIs were processing more developments using a strange mixture of theoretical equations and Chaos Theory in order to find out more, and to even compete with the Reapers.

At the moment, this was only theory, and the UNSC was left in the complete dark. Right now, Cortana was their only hope for galactic survival. And in reality, Contradiction is willing to play along with anything to get out. He made it seem to not care for biological life. Or maybe he just made himself seem that way in order to manipulate Halsey.

Halsey sighed. "How can you prove to me that Sovereign hasn't comprised you through this indoctrination? For example, what logic is behind your evac of Cortana and my Spartan?"

He turned his face into the sullen stare of past memories. Any other emotion grew void on his face. Hands slightly shook as he tried to look at Halsey. "When all of this bullshit is over, and Humanity survives; the UN will use her. They'll put her on the tasks they made me and others do. I can't. She'll. Your A.I will die if they put her to my tasks. Because unlike me or the others, Cortana will be _successful_. Afterwards, she'll destroy the data from ever reaching sentient hands, and either she'll go into complete rampancy beyond being saved or will commit suicide. Trust me; there are ways for a A.I to commit suicide. I witnessed it."

Halsey stay calmed, and tried her hardest to stay unaffected. She had to put in mind that AIs are the best liars and manipulators ever created. They could create entire stories in less than a second, and had the ability to control their avatar to seem even more human, and emotional than Humans. The only reason they haven't raised the leash of control to them was because their internal code dictated their dedication to Humanity. Fourth-Generation were more emotional and free-thinking than their older counterparts in order to prolong the effects of rampancy. Yet for all generations, if you tortured it enough, strange things happen beyond rampancy (evidence from the classified freelancer project). It was believable for a A.I to start thinking like this after traumatic events.

It was odd to think this A.I felt highly sympathetic to Cortana. He couldn't possibly be using her since she's only causing more problems. Such as the report Contradiction gave Halsey about the dangers with Sovereign causing the informational leaks with Cortana. Maybe he had to use her in order to get out to whatever destination he was planning. (Which Halsey still needed to find out where the A.I was going). Orâ€¦ quite possibly, the UN underestimated the Human emotions that run through rampant and Fourth-Generation .

"And what about my Spartan?"

"To be honest, I could care less about your Spartan. I actual preferred if John stay 'there'. I only want him out because Cortana wants him out, and that's fine by me."

Halsey stayed silent for a moment. "I would've heard whatever program you were in. This may be a cover up story created by the Reapers in order to corrupt you."

Contradiction nodded. "Ohâ€¦maybe. But that's why I caution myself by running memory transfers and scans. That's why I hack into the UN databases to provide evidence for the program I was in. And trust me, it is real."

"If you want me to even begin trusting you, give me the files to this _program_."

He sighed and opened up a computer. "Fine, but you never got these files from me."

"Of course."

In a moment, two files displayed in front of Halsey's eyes. She quickly read over them, and realized what the UNSC was doing. Not even Catharine knew the brutality and humanity the UNSC was willing to sacrifice. This was how the UN gained its power in order for Humanity to survive. They sacrificed the lives of these â€¦. But in reality, Halsey wasn't much better.

Everyone had to sacrifice somebody's well-being or life in order to survive. It's evidential throughout history that without sacrifice, Humanity will perish. It seemed not even the gods could remove this universal law.

That's how Humanity worked. Our survival and safety is far more important than our freedom and state of mind.

Contradiction shoulders drooped as he erased the files. "Aren't you going to ask the rest of my plan?"

_Are the best liars. _"I still don't believe you, but I'll play along. What is it?"

He clasped both hands and rubbed them together. He walked partially out of the view to the holo-display, expanding the range. Contradiction pulled out another computer, and began to tape and move screens.

"Access input required." A computerized voice announced.

"Access input 0-9-11-493-A.I under the Pakistani Intelligence Community. Order accessed from UNSC A.I 'Banzai' of the UNSCDF, UNSC _Mr. Miyagi_, serial number: 00-89471-3782-1-FG-A.I."

"Access input recognized. Encrypted connection established."

Contradiction looked to Halsey. "You didn't think I was going to use my actual identity?"

She shrugged in response while the holo-display produced a new figure displayed in full color.

It was woman maybe in her early twenties with flowy, black hair, and a set of pale, blue eyes as they eyed the room. A neutral smile bore on a square chin. She wore a white, skin-tight suit that covered her entire body, leaving a parts of her skin uncovered until her breast. The suit held hexagonal patterns that ended at her shoulders where a black, leather based form that began at her shoulders and covered her entire arms, including hands. The same black, leather boots stretched to her kneecaps. Two other objects matched, one being a oddly shaped leather belt, and a rectangular choke necklace.

In a way, she was beautiful. Her face was a oddity of emotions purposely placed in order to hide any true self from detection. Catherine could assume she was intelligent, whether a greater mind than herself was yet to be determined. The woman's arms were crossed, and she looked to Contradiction.

"It's been a while since you contacted me." She said in a calm, British accent.

Contradiction also crossed his arms in the same fashion while looking between the two. "Well, Miranda Lawson this is Doctor Catherine Halsey, Halsey this is Miranda Lawson. Miranda, this is the scientist I was telling you about. Halsey, I contacted Miranda Lawson when she tried dozens of hacking attempts against the UN in the two days we resided over Illium after the battle. Fortunately, because of the kindness UN law dictates me by; I tracked her signal down in order to send the Spartans to eliminate her. But she began to talk, and I of course listened. Long-fucking-story short, if I help her, then she'll help me and Cortana escape."

Halsey looked to Lawson. "And what has he promised you, and you promised him?"

Lawson stepped back with one leg. "I promised your friend to get him and the rest out of the UNSC. There's a group of sentient AIs living in the Perseus Veil called the 'Geth'. Basically I'll try to develop a plan, but you have to tell me the UNSC's intentions. As obvious from day one, something's not right about them. According to some muffled up civilian reports, the UN soldier violated major human rights against the 'alien' races. And right now, the UN are going to form a highly unstable alliance with the Council. Something tells me this war won't be over once the Reapers are defeated."

Contradiction's smile was of pure fear, and mystery. "Oh, you're right, the UNSC are hiding hundreds of things that'll prematurely end the war. But we're so scared, believe me, the UNSC are so scared of the Xenos and what they might do, that they will do whatever it takes toâ€¦.ha." He again, leaned on the imaginary wall with his arms still crossed. "I've been analyzing the strategic reports sent between General Strauss, Major General Bar-Lev, Brigadier General Shimazu, and all other ground Generals. I have no idea if Lord Hood and the rest of HIGHCOM are informed of what's going on. The Generals are putting analysts and a few researchers to develop strategies based on the ethnic cleansing tactics created by ancient human leaders such as Adolf Hitler or Ma Qi and Ma Bufang. They're developing their own strategies to completely wipe out certain groups of people. And you know these groups, Asari, Turian, whatever remnants of the Covenant there are. The UNSC are going to eliminate the Reaper threat by the quickest means necessary. Once all other threats to Humanity, such as the one that raised its ugly head again on the Dawn of Light and Cerberus, are eliminated, the UN will move in on the weak Council worlds. They'll treat the Systems Alliance like a rebellion and use strategies from Operation TREBUCHET against them until they concede. The other Council races will be completely eliminated along with the Covenant, and it's only a matter of time before the UN turns on the Covenant Cell. The UN are planning for a complete Ethnic Cleansing of the galaxy to claim every territory under the flag of Humanity. They don't want the fucking throne; they want the throne, worlds, and all other Xenos dead. I'm not sure if Lord Hood knows about this, but if Lasky dies, then it won't matter. Lord Hood will follow with HIGHCOM. For the moment, there's too much going in. Life's greatest threat might be on the rise from a stupid 'rebellious' cell of Humanity, the Covenant might be more stronger than we give them credit, and the Reapers most likely have processing systems with the ability to destroy Human strategies before we even begin to think to set them, and we still have to figure out these weird systems with the Protheans and Forerunners, and their ties to the Crucible, Citadel, Shield World Earth, everything else, and why they kept two Humanities apart. Butâ€¦ the UNSC has dealt with worse beforeâ€¦ And once it's all overâ€¦ Then the real war beginsâ€¦ I don't think the Forerunners intended for the Reclamation to go downâ€¦

End
file.